Interview with Rufus C. Phillips II

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Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

RUFUS PHILLIPS

Interviewed by: Ted Gittinger

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I would like to add one note for the reader. In 1982 at the time of the interview, I still felt under some security constraints not to tell the full story about my connection with the CIA while in military service in 1954 and 1955. The truth is that I went into the Army under what was called the Junior Office Training (JOT) Program. The arrangement, as best I can recall, was that I would enlist on my own, go through basic training on my own, apply for OCS on my own, make it through OCS on my own and if I did all that with no help then I would be assigned by the Army back to the CIA, but as a military officer on military pay with an obligation to serve out a full term of two years after OCS. My understanding was that if I failed OCS, I would have to serve out my three years enlistment as a soldier in whatever assignment the Army gave me. In any case, I made it through Army training including OCS and jump school and was assigned on military orders temporarily back to CIA headquarters in Washington, and then to Korea to a military unit which provided cover for military officers detailed to the CIA. From there I was picked up through a search by Lansdale of available military officers in the Far East and reassigned to MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group)/Vietnam. My Agency file, as well as my MOC file, showed French language capability. While I did know where Indochina was and followed events there through the Stars and Stripes during my four months in Korea, I knew little about it beyond the headlines and had no real intimation, only vague hopes, that I might be

assigned there. Once I got word from the CIA Station in Korea that I was being sent to Vietnam, which arrived almost simultaneously with my military orders, I did hear that Lansdale would be my boss but no one in Korea knew much about him. So I really went in blind on a military flight with other officers none of whom I knew. I was told to speak to no one about my assignment except to say it was to MAAG. The rest of the narrative is correct.

Q: First of all, Mr. Phillips, would you give us some background?What were the circumstances of your entry into government service?

PHILLIPS: In 1952, I was in law school in the University of Virginia. I had been approached by the CIA when I was at Yale to go to work for them but I decided to go to law school. And I went to law school and got bored, because this was the middle of the Korean War and I had friends who were involved in it and I didn't feel very good, frankly, about staying in law school. So I got out and I joined the agency briefly, and I was supposed to be sent to a project in Germany, which was a big training program for #migr#s from [the communist] bloc, who were then to be sent back in the bloc. If you remember that time, this was during the Korean War and there was an expectation, or if not an expectation, at least some anxiety that the Russians might do something in Europe. So there were a lot of people being trained there.

Well, this particular operation got blown, and I didn't have anything to do in the agency, so I got out of the agency, volunteered for the U.S. Army, was inducted at Fort Meade, went up to Indiantown Gap, took my basic training, volunteered for OCS, went to [Fort] Benning, went through OCS, graduated, went to jump school, and then was assigned to Korea.

In my MOS [Military Occupation Specialty], I put the fact that I spoke French, which I did to some degree. I'd taken it in college and I'd been to France and I did have some French language. It was in early 1954 when I was assigned to Korea. I went through basic training and OCS in 1953, and jump school, and at the end of 1953 I was sent to Korea. So in

1954, in July, I received notification that the army wanted to transfer me to Vietnam. What happened was in the Far East they went around looking for people that had some French in their background, because according to the Geneva Accords, a limit was to go on the introduction of any foreign personnel, additional military personnel, in Indochina, on I think it was August 12. They were looking to try to introduce additional people into the military advisory mission just to get the limit up, not sure of what they were going to do or how they were going to utilize them. So I was one of those who got tapped, and I didn't even know where Vietnam was.

I got sent down to Vietnam and arrived there, was put up in the Majestic Hotel with a whole bunch of other guys who were also assigned there, who didn't really have anything to do. We were just kind of milling around, trying to figure out what South Vietnam was all about. Then some of us got assigned to help with the refugees coming down, because there were a lot of refugees. I got assigned to a division that was created in MAAG by a guy named Ed Lansdale, whom I'm sure you know all about, which was called the Saigon Military Mission. And in effect, I was reassigned, but as a legitimate military officer, to this CIA mission, which was a special CIA mission there. Ed really had kind of a joint responsibility from both the Defense Department and CIA and the State Department to try to do something to save South Vietnam. I was a green second lieutenant at this point, and I didn't know anything about Vietnam, or about saving Vietnam. (Laughter)

Q: I was about to ask a fairly obvious question: did you knoanything about Colonel Lansdale at that time?

PHILLIPS: No. Never heard of him.

Q: You had no insight into his Philippine exploits?

PHILLIPS: At that point, no.

Q: Okay. Please excuse me. Go ahead.

PHILLIPS: Well, it was a very interesting experience, because for a time he had these people who were assigned to him, and he didn't know what to do with them either, because there was just a tremendous amount of confusion in Vietnam at this time. I mean, you had all these refugees coming south; I remember going over to his house one evening, trying to nail down exactly what it was that he wanted me to do, and here were a whole bunch of excited Vietnamese who were jumping up and down and gesticulating. A lot of them were Vietnamese Catholics from the North who were asking the Americans to arm them so that they could go after the French, because the French had just evacuated all of the Catholic zones in the North without giving anybody any warning, and in came the Viet Minh.

That was one of the reasons why all of these refugees suddenly appeared. But they felt that they had been stabbed in the back by the French.

This is to give you an idea of the kind of confusion.

I asked Colonel Lansdale what it was he wanted me to do, and he kind of put me off, and put me off, and finally he said, “There's a psywar [psychological warfare] staff, a G-5 that's attached to the Vietnamese army general staff, a guy named [Pham Xuan] Giai who heads it, and I want you to go out and get to know these people and see if there's anything you can do to help them.” And I said, “Well, what do they do?” He said, “Well, they have a dual mission. They're supposed to carry out the psychological warfare operations of the Vietnamese army, and they're also supposed to carry out troop indoctrination and training. I've talked to them before; they also have a psywar company that's headed by a Captain Duc, and they need some training. They really do. Maybe you can advise them and help them, because as I see it, fairly soon the Vietnamese government in the South is going to have to go in and try to reoccupy all these areas that are being evacuated by the Viet Minh, and right now they don't have any organization, they don't have any idea what they're supposed to be doing.”

So I went out there, and I introduced myself to Captain Giai, who habeen trained at Fort Bragg, by the way, and—

Q: Is that G-I-A-I?

PHILLIPS: G-I-A-I, yes. And he had a Captain Manh who was an assistant to him—a very nice fellow—and I've forgotten, another lieutenant who ran the radio station, Lieutenant Minh. All these guys had been together—no, two of them, the lieutenant and Captain Giai, had been at Fort Bragg. I went out there and I had a hard time getting these people to really talk to me about much of anything, but I was there.

Q: Did you use French or English?

PHILLIPS: Well, I used some French; my French was developing. You know, I was working on it but it wasn't as fluent as it really should have been, and so I used a combination of French and English. Some of them spoke some English, but there were very few people in the Vietnamese army, or in fact in Vietnam at this time, that spoke any English, so it was kind of almost sink or swim in French.

I went out, and I got to know the psywar company, and they asked me to help them develop a course to train their people, and I said sure. Then I came back to General Lansdale and said, “What do I do now? I'm no expert on psywar.” (Laughter) I was about to ask—And he said, “Well, here's Paul Linebarger's book on it [Psychological Warfare]. Read it and then try to figure out how you might apply something to the Vietnamese situation.”

So I studied that, and I started working with the psywar company. I didn't get very far with Giai, because it turned out that he was up to his eyeballs in planning and helping General Hinh organize this attempted coup against Diem.

One of the other things that I did was, there was a Philippine colonel there who was a military attache, who was President [Ramon] Magsaysay's wife's brother, a guy named Joe Banzon, who was very close to the Vietnamese military and had a good idea of the kinds of things that they really ought to be doing. We arranged to get invited on a trip out in the countryside, just to see what the Vietnamese government was doing in some of these areas which were being evacuated by the Viet Minh in the South.

There was an area called Long My, which was in Soc Trang province, where the Viet Minh had left and the Vietnamese army had moved in. So we visited that area; it took us at least half a day, traveling on boats, by canals and everything, to get there. And there were no bridges; the Viet Minh had blown all the bridges. It was pretty inaccessible. When we got there we found a district chief who was a military—I think he was a captain, who was really a very thoughtful, sound person. And we found that he was out there; he was trying to do something positive, but he had no backup whatsoever from the Vietnamese army or government. The people needed mosquito netting; they needed some kind of medical help. This zone had been a war zone and it really was in bad shape. He had no information program and no information about the Vietnamese government, about Diem, about anything.

So Joe and I wrote up a report and we brought it back to Ed, and he passed it on to the Vietnamese army and Diem to try to get something organized. We did get them to drop some supplies out there, some mosquito netting and soap and blankets and stuff like that, that people needed, because this—I'm trying to recall when this was—this was about October, I guess, in 1954.

He also introduced me to a guy named Hanh [?], who ran the Ministry of Social Action program which had been working with the neighborhoods in Saigon, trying to get self-help programs started.

Q: Is that H-A-N-H?

PHILLIPS: H-A-N-H. So through me [there] began to build up a series of contacts in the Vietnamese government who were very interested in trying to develop some plan to get the government organized and on its feet, and dealing with the situation of how were they going to reoccupy all of this vast amount of territory in South Vietnam that the Viet Minh were evacuating, according to the Geneva Accords, and trying to establish some government there.

The idea was generated that maybe, if Diem was agreeable, that we'd try to take some people from the army and from the civilian side of the government over to the Philippines, and let them see what Magsaysay had done there, in a very positive sense, in combating the Huks and re-establishing government and so forth. So a trip was laid on for, I think it was November. And we had some guys from the army, some from psywar, a couple of civilians, including a young guy who'd been to Michigan State [University], Nguyen Thanh, who was working in the office of the presidency, and Hanh, who was in charge of the social action program, we put them all together, and I went over as their escort officer.

It was a real learning experience for me, because I really didn't know anything about what was going on in the Philippines. I'd heard a lot from Joe Banzon, of course, and I was beginning to understand something. But it was a real eye opener, because we got the red-carpet treatment. These guys were taken over to the palace and had breakfast with Magsaysay—I've got a photograph of myself with the group with Magsaysay. They went out and they saw the whole thing. They saw civic action, how the troops handled themselves with the civilian population. They showed [them] the resettlement programs with the ex-Huk guerrillas. They saw everything that the Philippine government was doing, and I think it generated a lot of ideas. They came back; they gave a very optimistic report to President Diem. The thrust of the report was, “Look, we have to get organized in the government, and maybe the best thing to do is assign this responsibility to the army to organize what might be called pacification of these areas, but it's really re-establishing the government in these areas.”

So Diem liked this and assigned the responsibility to some staff people out in the general staff, to work on this, along with some people from his own staff, and I was assigned to work with them, to develop a pacification plan and sort of a program of how do you organize teams of army and civilians, and what would the army do, how would it handle itself, and so forth.

About this time, the American ambassador who'd been in Vietnam for a long time when the French were there, whose name was [Donald] Heath, was replaced by J. Lawton Collins (US Army General, retired). Collins came in there like a house afire and wanted to know what sort of positive things were we doing. Well, by that time we'd worked up this idea of pacification, so Ed presented it to him. Well, he bought it right away and said, “Oh, you know, we'll get full American support for this idea if the Vietnamese agree.” So I sat around a couple of nights running with the Vietnamese; we wrote up this whole thing. And we took the Philippine experience; we took some of the early French experience in Vietnam, including something called the GAMS, which was the Groupes— I've forgotten what [the] A stands for now, but—Groupes d'Action Mobiles, which were teams that the French trained and used, Vietnamese teams that went in and worked in areas where the French army would go in along with the Vietnamese army and then they would try to leave government behind.

There was some really good stuff in there about how to do this kind of thing. So we tried to pull it all together and come up with this program, and we, that is, the Americans working with the Vietnamese, developed into the first sort of operation, call it a pacification operation. A national security directive was set up as the framework for this thing, and army units were assigned to go in and reoccupy the southern tip of the country, which was Ca Mau. This one psywar company that they had was assigned to do propaganda, and a staging area was set up in Soc Trang, which was north of Ca Mau, and I was sent down there as a liaison officer with them. We had an American colonel and a major and myself. I worked mainly with the psywar company.

Then when the Vietnamese were ready and they went in the zone, they did not want very many Americans hanging around, and since I was the lowest ranked, although not terribly inconspicuous in terms of size, they got in touch with Lansdale and said, “We'll take one person, we'll take Phillips with us, but nobody else.”

Q: Did the people think you were a Frenchman?

PHILLIPS: Well, this is one of the—yes, in some areas. So I went in with them down to Ca Mau, which was—boy, that was a rough ride, I'll tell you. The Viet Cong—then [they] were the Viet Minh—had just cut the roads into ribbons.

One of the things that I was also doing was trying to look out for a Filipino-manned medical operation called Operation Brotherhood, that had been invited into South Vietnam to take care of the refugees. They had agreed to send a medical team into this area, because it was known that the area had been under Viet Minh rule for nine years, had no medical supplies, obviously had very, very serious medical problems. I had a radio with me and an independent means of communications to MAAG, so I was calling for them to get medical supplies, too. I was there as kind of a supernumerary, really; I worked with a guy named Colonel [Duong Van] Duc, who was the head of the whole operation. He took me around with him from time to time, and then I worked trying to help Operation Brotherhood. I lived off of balut and rice for about a week—Q: Would you spell that for us?

PHILLIPS: Do you know what balut is?

Q: Yes, I do, but the transcriber may not.

(Laughter)

PHILLIPS: Well, it's a duck embryo that's developed along quite bit, and then you hard-boil it and eat it.

Q: Could you spell that?

PHILLIPS: I don't know. That's the Filipino word for it.

Q: We'll look it up.

PHILLIPS: [There are two things] that I remember particularly well from this visit, or this assignment. One is the tremendous spirit that the Filipinos had and how they adapted to really very primitive conditions. They had to perform operations at night with no electric power, and I remember they brought in this one woman who had to have a Caesarean or she was going to die. So they put her up on a table and gave her a local anesthetic only, and I was one of the guys holding the flash light; you know, there were three flashlights and that was it.

Q: That's about as basic as you can get.

PHILLIPS: That's about as basic as you can get. And she was fine; she survived, the baby was fine, and it was really something.The other thing that I remember is that Colonel Duc decided to make a trip all the way down to the tip of Ca Mau, to a village that had been repeatedly bombed by the French and was the heart of Viet Minh resistance. It was an area which manufactured charcoal—that was their only industry—out of mangrove; the whole area is mangrove swamps. I asked him something about the area, but nobody knew anything, nobody briefed me, really told me anything, so I took off with them. We left early in the morning. It was hot and so I dressed in shorts and short-sleeved shirt.

We finally got down towards this one big village at the tip of Ca Mau about dusk, and I'm seeing the village; you could see where some smoke was, and it was about three or four miles away, and there were these tremendous mangrove swamps. By that time the canals had opened up and were very, very wide, and I see this cloud coming out of the mangroves. I said, “I wonder what that is.” Well, what it was were mosquitoes. And when we landed, those mosquitoes jumped on us like something I have never seen in my

life. Literally, they were so thick you could cut a swath through them with your hand. So everybody was waving handkerchiefs or whatever they had to try to get these mosquitoes off of them.

We landed, and nobody explained much about who I was or anything else. We all congregated over at kind of a little—you could call it a cafe, it was really a shack, where they served tea. And we sat down around this table. They put a smoke pot under the table to keep the mosquitoes away. Well, you could hardly see, and you were choking because of the smoke, but that was better than being eaten alive by the mosquitoes.

I looked around and there's this crowd gathering. It gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and I hear all this undertone [makes droning noise], and it gets louder and louder. I get to feeling a little uneasy, you know, because I look at people's eyes and they don't look friendly. And I said, “What's going on?” They said, “Well, we'll find out.” And one of them goes out; he comes back and says, “Oh, they think you're French.” And I said, “Well, for Pete's sake, tell them I'm not, tell them I'm an American.” They were ready to eat me alive, because the French had bombed this place.

He got up and made an announcement, and it's dead quiet. And everybody was very nice afterwards. I remember they brought us some food, some soup and stuff to eat, some noodles, and they'd set up some cots with mosquito nets, which we'd brought with us, because these poor folks had no mosquito nets down there. How in the hell they survived those mosquitoes, I'll never know. We ran from where we were and jumped in these cots and pulled the mosquito nets around us, and then with a flashlight, you know, you swatted the ones that had gotten on the inside and tried to go to sleep. And it was like sleeping on top of an electric dynamo, because these mosquitoes would come up underneath the cot and try to get through the canvas, and the hum was so loud—I mean, it was almost deafening.

Q: That's incredible.

PHILLIPS: I mean, they were really—you felt like, boy, they were a bunch of tigers that were just ready to eat you alive. And of course, in the morning they all disappeared, they went back to the swamp.

Well, that's the other thing that I remember about Ca Mau. (Laughter)

Q: Among the medical supplies, you requested repellent and mosquitnetting, I'm sure.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, next time I didn't go into an area like that iany shorts and short-sleeved shirts, either.

Q: That's the area where the U Minh Forest was, wasn't it?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: Did you see any of that?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, I went by it, and that's of course where they had had very, very strong resistance. And there was some evidence then that they had left a number of people behind.

Q: There was some evidence of that?

PHILLIPS: Yes. And there were some things, some propaganda they'd left behind, you know, “Resist forever,” “Don't let the government take you over,” “We will return” kind of stuff.

The interesting thing about the operation was that the Vietnamese army really wasn't very ready for this. There were some incidents where the troops did not behave very well. They did not have any information, you know, propaganda of any kind about the government ready to hand out. They were, in short, unprepared. So there were a number of lessons learned out of that particular operation, which when they had finished the occupation, I

was called back to Saigon to write up these lessons and get together with the Vietnamese army people to discuss the next operation they had on tap, which was the reoccupation of Interzone 5, in central Vietnam.

Q: That's the Viet Minh designation?

PHILLIPS: That's right. That was the area which they had held up there for—the French had penetrated it only once, in Operation Atlante, and they'd stayed in for about thirty or sixty days and then been obliged to withdraw.

Q: Is this on the coast?

PHILLIPS: Yes, this is the provinces of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. There was a Vietnamese colonel named Le Van Kim who was assigned to head up this operation. He and I got along very well right from the start. He was very smart, I mean really intelligent, and he was very interested in my observations from what I had seen in the South. So we developed together a program for indoctrinating the army, and he was assigned two divisions to carry out this operation. We set up an indoctrination program of over a month's duration to indoctrinate these troops in terms of how to deal with the civilian population, you know, a lesson in courtesy, and that you're there to help the people. And all this was just drilled and drilled and drilled into these guys.

Then I was assigned to go with them on this operation. I think Ed has this story in his book [In the Midst of Wars], which is absolutely true, that the Vietnamese asked for me, and there were some—we were in a joint military mission with the French, in TRIM [Training Relations Instruction Mission], and the particular section that we were involved in had, as its major mission, advising the Vietnamese in what were called national security operations, or pacification. There were French officers who were working with me on this thing. The Vietnamese asked for me to go with them but not the French, and the French got very exercised about this. So this got up to the top level of MAAG and became a political issue. So General [John “Iron Mike”] O'Daniel asked the Vietnamese, because the

French were saying, “Well, they say they don't want any foreigners going along.” There was a big meeting about this. The Vietnamese explanation was that I wasn't a foreigner, I was their friend.

Q: That's almost verbatim from Lansdale's book, I think.

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: And it did happen that way?

PHILLIPS: It did happen that way.

So when they organized this operation, I went up there, and I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, so I did not dress in uniform or anything like that. I went with Colonel Kim, stayed with him during this whole operation. It took about almost three months to really—two and a half months—because the method of evacuating the zone was set up by a joint commission composed of the French and the Viet Minh, and there was a French unit that acted as kind of a buffer between the Vietnamese army coming in and the Viet Minh evacuating. They started in part of Quang Ngai, and they evacuated in sections, going south all the way down to Binh Dinh, to Qui Nhon, which is where the troops went out—about fifteen thousand Viet Minh troops went out on troopships right at the end of this whole process. This thing was very, very successful. It was successful, first off, because during the entire reoccupation operation, there was not a single incident between a Vietnamese soldier and a civilian, not one.

Q: That's remarkable.

PHILLIPS: We're now talking about two divisions of troops; we're talking about Vietnamese army troops that, back when they were fighting under the French, had had a reputation for pillaging and stealing chickens and not having very good behavior with the civilian population.

I think there were two things that happened. One was that we really did—Colonel Kim carried out a very successful kind of indoctrination. The other was that there were a lot of stirrings of pride having to do with the fact that they now had an independent Vietnamese government that was not a puppet of the French, and that Diem was obviously not a puppet of anybody, because he was having so many difficulties with the French and in fact he was opposing French attempts to overthrow him, beginning with General Hinh, and then with the Binh Xuyen and the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. The people in the Vietnamese army and in general knew what the hell was going on and knew that the French were really trying to reassert control, and the fact that Diem was standing up gave him some real status as a nationalist leader. He already had a reputation as a nationalist leader because he'd never agreed to cooperate with the French. That's another story, about how he—that's one of the reasons, I think, really, why [Pierre] Mendes-France agreed to put him there, was sort of a last gesture to the Vietnamese.

In any case, the Vietnamese really began to get some real pride in themselves as people, as an army, as a country, and I think that helped an awful lot. In any case, this whole thing went forward. This time the army was prepared with medical supplies; they were prepared with bridging materials, we had the engineers in there building roads, and in effect they started a really successful kind of development program concurrently with this reoccupation. And they could show that they were effective.

One element that we did not get going right away was we did not get the civilian teams that we should have had to set up government right away. But in general, the military functioned very, very well. In fact, so well that at the end of this whole operation, after only about two weeks after the Viet Minh had been evacuated north, Diem came up to Qui Nhon, and of course Kim organized a demonstration for him. But the demonstration had so much participation that a lot of it was spontaneous, because you couldn't simply organize these people that way. A lot of it was, I think, resentment against the Viet Minh who'd been there a long time and had really in many quarters, with at least the people that

were sort of neutral or who were not, say, communist party members, had almost outworn their welcome. Because they were very repressive. They'd carried out land reform in a very arbitrary way.

And also because the government turned out to be a hell of a lot better than anybody expected. You see, the Viet Minh put out this propaganda that the Vietnamese army troops were going to come in and pillage and rape and so forth, and when they first came in the population just hung back. I mean, there was no response. They'd just sit there impassively. But then when the troops started trying to be helpful, this started to break down, and you could see the change as we went further south. In other words, the troops became more adept and more at ease in dealing with the population, and the population started to gain confidence in the army. At the end of this thing, I still have somewhere in my files photographs of villagers coming out with bowls of water for the troops. Voluntarily. This was the spirit of this thing, the way it wound up. And that was reflected in that first visit of Diem, of which I have photographs, too, which was quite a demonstration, it really was. Part of it was, I think, a demonstration of support for the fact that Diem was in effect taking on the sects and taking on the French, because word about this was spreading like wildfire.

Well, I stayed there, and I remember one incident. We needed some supplies, we needed some bridging material, we needed some other stuff, and I kept sending communications down to MAAG and we weren't getting any response. So I told Kim, “Why don't we fly down there and see if we can't get something organized?” Well, of course, this was when the Binh Xuyen had cranked up their mini-revolt in Saigon, and the war in Saigon started. Kim and I arrived in town and took off—he went to his house and I went over to see Ed, and we were going to have a meeting with General O'Daniel down in MAAG the next morning. Kim came over and we said, “Well, you better not drive in your car, you better come with us.” He said, “Gee, I don't even have a weapon.” So I went and got and loaned him my pistol, so he'd have some weapon with him, and we drove down—I never will forget this—in order to get to MAAG, we had to go by this big Binh Xuyen post that's right

in back of what was then MAAG headquarters, which was down in the middle of Cholon. Here all the Binh Xuyen were, manning the ramparts there. We went in and we started this meeting with General O'Daniel, and all hell broke loose! Man, there were 105s coming over the MAAG headquarters, and stray bullets were going through the windows, and I never will forget, with all of us sort of slumped down in our chairs, like this, you know, so that the windows were up here someplace. (Laughter) And we were yelling at each other like this across the room, because you couldn't hear yourself think.

Finally we got through this and we said to Kim, “You'd better stick with us on the way back.” We got in the car and started to go back up, and it had quieted down by this time. We went by this Binh Xuyen post which had been taken by the Vietnamese army and, boy, there were Binh Xuyen caps and uniforms all over the place; those guys had just shucked those things and gone into civvies and bugged out. (Laughter)

Q: They didn't stick around too long?

PHILLIPS: They didn't stick around, no.

Then I went back up to Qui Nhon with Kim, and sort of wound up thaoperation.

Let's see, what did I do next? Well, I guess I worked on plans to try to formalize some kind of what you would call a G-5 structure in the Vietnamese army and to set up a regular training program. We got some people in from Hawaii who worked for the U.S. Army psywar company there, to set up some training programs. We set up a psywar school.

Then I was due to be mustered out of the army in November, and I camback to the U.S. and was mustered out.

Q: That was November of what year, now?

PHILLIPS: In 1955. Then Ed asked me to come back as a civilian, to help him out, and I debated that and decided to do that. So I joined as a regular staff member of the agency

(Central Intelligence) and went back out and was there in 1956, with the exception of about two months out for getting hepatitis.

I continued to work mainly with the Vietnamese army in setting up the psywar school and setting up a G-5 staff. The other big project I worked on was Vietnamese civic action, which was—the idea was really one of sending village development workers out in the villages to help the people dig wells and carry out sort of self-help projects.

There was a wonderful guy whose name I can't remember right now, but I will, who was appointed the head of this, and he had a very interesting history. He had been a general in the Viet Minh army, and he was one of two leaders who went out in revolt in Saigon in 1945 and led the initial Viet Minh resistance against the British and then subsequently against the French, because the British occupied Saigon first and then turned it over to the French. But he never was a communist, never joined the Communist Party. His name was Cung, Kieu Cong Cung. He became suspect when the Viet Minh started carrying out their land reform programs in 1950-51, and he was in Lao Cai, which is all the way up on the Chinese border; he'd been assigned up there. I think it was 1951 or 1952. And he decided that he just didn't want to have any more part of the Viet Minh, so he and his wife—and they had two small kids—he deserted, and they took off in the middle of the night, and using sort of false identities, they walked all the way from Lao Cai to South Vietnam. He retired on a farm, because he wouldn't have anything to do with the puppet Vietnamese governments either. But when Diem came back, he came in and volunteered to help. So Diem assigned him to the civic action project.

So we worked on the organization of that and got a decree through, and sent some of his people over to the Philippines to take a look at what they were doing, and worked up a program to present to the AID mission, to get out some village development advisers and to give them some real assistance in village development. Somehow, AID had independently done a study of Vietnam and had determined that what Vietnam really needed was industrial development, that this was going to solve Vietnamese problems,

and it ought to be concentrated in the cities. And they didn't want to have anything to do with the rural countryside. This became a big bone of contention between Lansdale, and through him, MAAG, with the AID mission. Because we said that, “Look, the problems are out in the countryside, and if you don't do something about that and we don't get an effective government on its feet out in the countryside, there's going to be real problems in the future. This is where the focus ought to be.”

Unfortunately, we lost that fight and AID won. The Vietnamese went ahead and created civic action anyway, but it didn't have any real American help or participation, it didn't get any effective assistance. So you had these teams of guys going out there, but there really wasn't very much support, and the Vietnamese government structure was so bureaucratic that you couldn't get the other ministries to come in the way they were supposed to, and provide schools and teachers where they were needed, and provide the seeds and fertilizer where agricultural development was needed. So civic action never realized its potential and unfortunately became more and more, later on, sort of a propaganda arm, and lost its credibility. But that was, I think, a very significant time in which Diem was very, very open to American advice and participation in what would have been a very, very vital effort, and the U.S. said, “No, we're not interested.”

Q: You think that was pretty important?

PHILLIPS: I think it was damned important. I think it was vital, and I think it might have had some real effect on how things might have evolved in South Vietnam.

At the same time, the Vietnamese wanted to keep a territorial army force, and we were insisting that they reorganize their armies in divisions, and we were insisting that the threat lay in some kind of overt invasion over the frontier. There was a group in MAAG that didn't agree with that either, again, mainly headed by Ed, because he knew from his experience in the Philippines, and he knew enough about how the communists operated, that we were going to see this problem again. This was not going away.

Also, it was apparent from what we learned out of these reoccupation operations that the Viet Minh were deliberately preparing themselves for a resurgence in the South. For example, not only did they leave people behind—that was fairly obvious—the other things they did, which were very significant, were that in Ca Mau and up in Interzone 5 they forcibly took, out of families, and not just families that were connected with the Viet Minh, but they literally kidnaped, in many instances, young men who were, say, from about eight to twelve, and took them up north with them. I'm not talking about small numbers, either, I'm talking about over ten thousand. These were the guys that they put in training programs up north, and these were the guys that came back down south.

The other thing they did was they ordered all of their unmarried soldiers to marry Vietnamese women in that remaining period there. The word went out on this about around the end of 1954, and they had until, as I recall, May of 1955 before they evacuated completely. The word went out not only [to] marry them, but get them pregnant. And that established family connection on the part of all those who did not have family connections. And that, plus a few select people, was their plan. That was their stay-behind.

Q: And you had firsthand knowledge of this?

PHILLIPS: We had firsthand knowledge of it, sure. They left saying,“We're going to come back.”

Let me just clarify that picture a little bit. We know now, ocourse, what happened, the subversion that took place.

Q: Was it possible to discount the possibility of a Korea-stylinvasion from the North, do you think?

PHILLIPS: I don't think it was possible to discount it totally. But I think that if you really looked at it and said, “Well, if this happened, we were determined to apply American power,” it could have been stopped fairly effectively, because there's only one road coming

south, and there are a whole bunch of bridges, and it'd be damned hard to get any kind of regular army force through there in any significant numbers. The Ho Chi Minh Trail did not exist at this point; there were no facilities for getting people through Laos, so that anything that was going to move in any substantial number would have to come down that coastal road. I don't say there wasn't any threat; sure, there was always that threat that they might do that, but the larger threat really lay in a resurgence of guerrilla warfare.

Q: Were there efforts being made then to provide local securitforces as opposed to the army?

PHILLIPS: Well, yes, there was something called the Civil Guard. The idea was sort of to try to model that after the Philippine Constabulary a little bit. They had had a kind of a garde civil before, but this never got organized properly; the commanders of it were weak, it became kind of an adjunct to the province chiefs. A lot of them used them as gardeners. The U.S. set up a training program utilizing Michigan State on contract, but they really didn't get very much training. They didn't have any status. I think that “Hanging Sam” [Samuel T.] Williams, who replaced General O'Daniel, was right in one thing, and that was that he was trying to take over the Civil Guard so he could get his hands on them and train them, and of course that was resisted by USAID, who had the responsibility—

Q: Why was that?

PHILLIPS: It's a typical kind of bureaucratic struggle: don't take something away from me even if I'm not doing anything with it. This is part of my turf.

Q: I've heard that it was a conceptual difference, that the Michigan people wanted them to be a police force and Williams wanted them to be a national guard-oriented kind of a thing.

PHILLIPS: Yes, I think that was part of the problem. We tried to work—I know that Ed got involved to some degree in trying to get the concept across that this had to be much more than a police force, that what we were talking about is really a kind of a replacement,

under the Ministry of Interior, for what used to be the territorial armed forces. See, the armed forces were divided before into territorial forces and then regular units. When they did away with the territorial forces, which was in and of itself a mistake, the idea—at least the idea that some of us hoped would come about—would be that the Civil Guard would become that territorial force. They never did. So it left a security vacuum out in the countryside, too.

So you had two things that happened, really. One was that you had an economic development vacuum, and you had a security vacuum. Diem then, just as Ed was ending his time out there, made a mistake. Part of it was, I think, well motivated. He decided he would replace all of the village chiefs, because he didn't want the ones hanging on who had been sort of corrupt under the French and so forth. But the net result was that he put in a lot of new people that didn't know what the hell they were doing. They were out of touch. And he cut off a kind of a vital contact with what was going on down at the village level. And there was no program for village elections, or anything else, that was developed. So he created almost a governmental vacuum at the village level.

Q: I think Lansdale says in his book that he didn't know that that was even in the works until he was gone. PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: I wonder why that was. He was in touch, clearly, with so mucthat Diem was doing; I wonder why such a crucial thing was—

PHILLIPS: I don't know. Well, the Vietnamese didn't always have a kind of a broad view of how all these things interrelated with each other. I don't know whether that was kind of a political decision made by Nhu or not. We were having problems with Nhu already, in 1956, because he had a big plan to take over sort of political control of the army, and he wanted the G-5 to become kind of an agitprop-type organization, very similar to the commissars in the Soviet army, and we successfully fought that one off, working with Tran

Trung Dung and his assistant, a guy named Nguyen Dinh Thuan, who were sort of the—Tran Trung Dung was the minister of defense. But—

Q: Did you have much dealings with Nhu yourself?

PHILLIPS: No. Not during that period, none at all. I had some dealings with Tran Trung Dung and Thuan because they helped get civic action on its feet, although civic action was under the presidency. They provided a lot of logistics.

Q: You mentioned two of the areas that you went to personally and were involved in extensively, and that was Ca Mau and then Interzone 5. Did you go to any other places in Vietnam for extensive periods?

PHILLIPS: Not at that time.

Q: Not then. Were you operating more out of Saigon?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I was operating more out of Saigon and then going where something specifically was happening that the Vietnamese army was involved in.

Q: I see.

PHILLIPS: I got up to some of the other provinces, and I got up to the high plateau, but I didn't really get very much involved. At that point, nobody was paying much attention to the Montagnards. That was still kind of a problem to be dealt with. But later on, Diem selected Colonel Kim, promoted him, made him general, sent him up to the high plateau to develop a special program for the Montagnards. I remember visiting him in, I think it was 1957 I went up there, went around with him and saw what he was doing.

Let me see if I've answered all your questions. I've been running ofat the mouth here.

Q: No, no, not at all. I was about to ask a question I'm not sure that you have any direct knowledge of, and that concerns the stay-behind activities that Lansdale had organized in the North, or was that compartmentalized so that you weren't party to it?

PHILLIPS: That was pretty compartmentalized; I wasn't involved witthat.

Q: I see.

PHILLIPS: I see, however, that that's being written up in some quarters as some kind of American attempt to destabilize the Viet Minh regime, and that's ridiculous, you know. The notion that a few guys in Hanoi, dropping contaminants into the electric power station and some other stuff, somehow is going to just destabilize the North Vietnamese regime, is absolutely absurd.

Q: Well, what was the point?

PHILLIPS: Well, what I can recall from the time, because I was not directly involved but I knew that some of this was going on, the point was just to slow the bastards down. I mean, we didn't know whether they were going to come roaring south as soon as the French got to the point where they reduced their troops, and the South was absolutely disorganized and defenseless. So the idea was to do something that would preoccupy them a little bit up there, give them some difficulties in trying to administer things, and keep them off of the back of the South. That was the purpose. It was as simple as that.

Q: I don't suppose you had any hand in the famous almanac incidents,did you?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

Q: Did you really? Tell me about that.

PHILLIPS: Well, the reason I got involved in it was that the guy who had been working with this—there was a Vietnamese journalist who came down from the North, very interesting guy, who you might interview. He's down in Richmond. His name is Bui An Tuan, T-U-A-N.

Q: Go ahead.

PHILLIPS: He was an interesting guy and a very good writer. He had been part of the VNQDD [Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang], which was the old nationalist party. Ed met him—I don't know how he met him—but got interested in him because he was a good writer and he'd written some pieces about what

Vietnam ought to do. So he sort of encouraged him to try to write some political tracts along the lines, and even gave him a copy of Tom Paine's Common Sense. This was to try to get some notion in print as to why should the South Vietnamese even resist and why should they even try to put together a country. This may sound silly to ask those questions, but there were thousands of South Vietnamese asking that question of themselves, “Why don't we just lie down and give up? We've had it. This country has no future. There isn't even a country. What is this, cut off halfway down, no government, the police force in the hands of the Binh Xuyen, Diem's own palace guard in the hands of the Binh Xuyen, the Binh Xuyen running Saigon and running all the rackets, the army trying to pull a coup against Diem sponsored by the French, the sects with their own military forces off doing their own thing. I mean, this is no country and it's got no future.”

One of the things that was obviously desperately needed was to try to develop some notion of a Vietnamese cause, a political cause. I mean, why should anybody even try to put a government together? There were plenty of nationalists around who were anticommunist because of their experience and the fact that they'd had relatives killed by the communists, and that Ho Chi Minh had really stabbed the nationalist movement in the back. So there was a lot of bitterness over that, but there was a lot of hostility to the French. Diem was powerless; he seemed weak because he didn't have any authority so,

you know, what was the meaning of it? So the idea was to try to encourage people that had some ability to write, to write about these things. And he did, and he got some pretty good stuff published in the newspapers. He published a pamphlet, which we helped them [with]. We paid for the cost of printing it. But I wasn't involved in that.

Then the guy who was working with him left and so I was asked, when I was in Saigon at least, to kind of look after him and talk to him. I think it was Ed, really, who got this idea, because we were looking at the fact that, first of all, the Vietnamese depend heavily on soothsayers. Secondly, there were a number of soothsayers that put out their own publications, and they sold very well. And they'd make predictions for the Chinese New Year. Ed got this idea about, “Well, could we put one together?” We'd sponsor it, pay for it, but it would be a Vietnamese deal, and so he said, “Talk to Tuan about this and see what he thinks.” So I talked to him about it. He thought it was a crazy idea. He said, “Well, you know, these people are very independent. They won't do anything like that.” I said, “Well, why don't you go approach a couple of them? I'll bet you there are some that for a little money will make up whatever predictions you want.” (Laughter)

So he went around and he rounded up some, including a couple of fairly well-known ones, and he put the whole thing together. He came up with the idea of how to design it and who would focus on what aspects, and so forth and so on. He even had a couple of guys that weren't part of this deal at all, and they were writing just neutral stuff about—you know, there was a lot of stuff that would interest somebody who was worried about when should he marry; all of the family and personal stuff was in there, too. But there were a couple of big predictions that had to do with political events. One of them was that Diem was going to succeed, and the other one was that this one particular—Chung Kien?—or I've forgotten his name, he was not the secretary general of the party in North Vietnam, but he was a rising star in the—

Q: Truong Chinh?

PHILLIPS: I think so.

Q: “Long March.” He was the—

PHILLIPS: He was a real hard-core type.

Q: Yes, pro-Chinese.

PHILLIPS: Yes, a real hard-core type; that he was going to suffer reverse. And so this thing was put out and it sold very well.

Q: What did you do with the money? PHILLIPS: Paid us back for all the investment. (Laughter)

Q: And it made a splash. Well, I'd heard some of this; I wasn't surif it all fit together, but it does. That's good.

PHILLIPS: So that's how I got involved in that.

Q: Is that a typical Lansdale kind of idea?

PHILLIPS: Well, he had a lot of very imaginative ideas like that. I would say that his greatest imagination was really on what you might call the positive political side, or how do you get a government like this on its feet, and what kind of things should the president be doing, and what kind of program. Because when he went out there, he really stunned Diem, I think, the first time he ever saw him, because he listened to him, and he went with the guy who was then head of USIS (US Intelligence Service), PAO (Public Affairs Officer) George Hellyer, who spoke very good French, and Diem told them this whole story. So he asked him questions, and Ed asked him how would he feel if he—Ed—drew up some thoughts about a political program for him. Well, Diem thought this was great.

So Ed went back and he wrote up a political program for Vietnam, for the President, but for Vietnam, and came back and presented it to Diem, and Diem, I think, was really stunned by that. He started to pick up on ideas about what to do and how the government should function and so forth and so on. I think that was how Ed really established rapport with Diem, because Diem felt that he understood his problems, that he understood the country, and he had some ideas to give. That began a very, very interesting relationship.

Q: Yes, I want to ask a little bit about that. It's just occurred to me: one of the things that puzzled me the first time I came across this whole story, which was a number of years ago, was that Colonel Lansdale's position is rather anomalous in some ways.

PHILLIPS: It was, yes.

Q: [It's] hard to figure out where he fits in a neat bureaucratistructure. And of course the answer is that he doesn't fit at all.

PHILLIPS: Yes, that's both his virtue and one of the problems thahe encountered in working.

Q: Well, since he was wearing a uniform, and you originally were wearing a uniform, and theoretically were working for General Williams, how does this work out?

PHILLIPS: Well, General O'Daniel, first.

Q: O'Daniel first, yes, and then Williams. How did he operate thaway?

PHILLIPS: I think that, first of all, they very quickly came to appreciate the fact that, one, Ed was one of the few people that really knew what was going on; that secondly, he had a very good concept of the total meaning of national security in Vietnam. And third, that he could get things done, and if they wanted to sell an idea to Diem, an idea that was

worthwhile, that one of the best channels was to go through Ed. So they gave him a very wide latitude.

He'd run into problems with guys like J. Lawton Collins, who thought that whatever [Paul] Ely told him was the truth, because they'd both been comrades in World War II. And he ran into problems with the regular CIA station because they were terribly jealous, and he was operating all over the landscape, in effect.

Q: Now you've just said something that puzzled me. You referred to the regular CIA station. Does that mean Lansdale was the irregular CIA station?

PHILLIPS: He was, yes.

Q: Was there another chief of station?

PHILLIPS: Yes, there was.

Q: Who was that, or can you say?

PHILLIPS: I've forgotten who it was.

Q: Okay. Well, I can see that this breaks all kinds of bureaucraticrockery.

PHILLIPS: Of course it does. Lots of bureaucratic crockery got broken, particularly when some of the people that they were in touch with didn't want to talk to them anymore because they didn't find anything there to talk about, and wanted to deal with Ed because they felt Ed had some ideas about how to do something.

Q: I can see where you can get into deadly circumstances that way,all right.

(Interruption)

PHILLIPS: One of Lansdale's people had been out of the service for some time and sort of had forgotten his military courtesy to some degree. You know, you get rain during the rainy season. So he arrives at MAAG, and Williams always used to get there earlier, and he had an office up where he could look down on the courtyard. And this fellow comes in and the rain starts, so he unfurls an umbrella, and he—(Laughter)

Q: Officers are not supposed to carry umbrellas.

PHILLIPS: No, sir! Boy, did that ever hit the fan!

(Laughter)

Q: Yes.

PHILLIPS: That was Williams.

Q: How long then did you stay in Vietnam? Let's say from 1956, weryou there continuously?

PHILLIPS: No, I was there from 1954 through the end of 1956.

Q: I see. So you weren't there when some of these programs that I have listed here were begun, I take it, the Denunciation of Communism movement, the—?

PHILLIPS: No.

Q: Okay, and—

PHILLIPS: Land reform, yes, I knew Wolf Ladejinsky, but not personally. I had some contact with him. Land reform did get started in 1956, at least the thought got started, the program really didn't get started.

Q: Yes, I guess the legal part of it was pronounced in any case.Did you know Lou Conein? Was he there?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes, I've known Lou—we're personal friends. Known hia long time.

Q: I asked a question here about the sects and Diem's victory ovethem, but I think you may have said pretty much about that.

PHILLIPS: Well, it was highly significant, because it really was Diem versus the French, and it was pretty well known that the French were trying to maneuver through the sects. The Binh Xuyen had no support whatsoever; I mean, these guys were a bunch of gangsters.

Q: They've been compared with the Mafia. What do you think of that?

PHILLIPS: That's not too different. I remember one of the things they operated in Saigon, among all the other rackets, which included opium, prostitution, the gambling halls, and everything else—Saigon in 1954 and in the early part of 1955, until Diem cracked down on it, was a wide-open city. It was like Shanghai in 1944, 1945, at the end of the war, or prewar Shanghai. I mean it was just wide open. Well, they ran all the vice, because Bao Dai had sold the police force to them.

Well, one of the things they operated was a car-stealing ring, and they'd take cars and redo them and sell them. We had heard about this, and I had a jeep stolen. I had an old army jeep that was painted blue, and damn if they didn't steal this thing. I figured that they'd done it, so I went down and protested personally to the police chief. I knew the bastard was probably responsible, but I went in and made a formal protest and really raised hell about it, just for the fun of it.

Q: He never acknowledged anything, of course?

PHILLIPS: Of course not. We got the jeep back.

Q: I heard a story about a car that got sent south from up nortthat had a background.

PHILLIPS: (Laughter) I'll let Ed tell you about that, okay? All I know is that we had a bunch of cars, and I don't know where they came from, but I used them.

Q: Okay.

PHILLIPS: The other thing that's kind of interesting was that during this period, the French were carrying out a psywar campaign against the Americans, and they—

Q: To what end? What were they—?

PHILLIPS: Well, they were trying to frighten us or get us to go home or—you know, there was this thing where the French intelligence was really overrunning the Binh Xuyen. I mean, they were over in the headquarters there. And at the same time, some of their guys were in TRIM, and we kind of figured out after a while that half of these guys were not interested in doing any work, they were just there to watch us, to watch the Americans and see what the hell—particularly [what] Lansdale was doing. And all this legitimate activity, which was really legitimate, they couldn't understand. They thought there must be some hidden meaning to all this pacification operation. I don't know whether they thought we had two divisions up there that we were going to suddenly put on a ship and march into Saigon or what, but they were really—they started blowing up cars and they planted a bomb in the office of the USIS, the library, and blew the front of it to smithereens.

Q: The French did that? How did we know that it was the French?

PHILLIPS: Well, we traced it back—first of all, they'd put out some propaganda that was obviously phony, I mean, they had a front, “The Front for a Free Vietnam Opposed to American Domination,” and so forth and so on, and just by checking around, it sort of

targeted in on a couple of the Deuxi#me Bureau, who were engaged in this deal. Why they thought they were going to frighten us off with this kind of stuff, I don't know. But they did, they tried it, and it just never went anywhere. I got a poison pen note in the mail from them.

Q: I was going to ask if you thought this was some of the old Frenccolons around?

PHILLIPS: There was a little bit of that, you know. What happened was that after Diem was put in power, the old French Colonial Office folks really reasserted themselves, and they were the ones who were involved in the plotting, and they would lie to Ely about what the hell was going on; they wouldn't keep him fully informed, and then Ely would tell Lawton Collins, and Lawton Collins would believe it. And he wouldn't believe even visual evidence. There was a guy named Howie Simpson, who was with USIS, who got around a lot and knew a lot of the French, and for some reason Bay Vien, who was the head of the Binh Xuyen, really liked him. So he went over to talk to him. This was when the war in Saigon really started up. They were sitting around having a drink or something over in his house. He had this incredible house with this courtyard, and around it he had cages of tigers and so forth, live tigers, and in comes this dispatch rider from French army headquarters, and snaps to a salute and says, “A message for you, General, from So-and-so,” just giving him his orders. (Laughter) And Howie is sitting there, you see?

So he goes back and reports this to Collins, and Collins wouldn't believe him. He said, “No, that can't be true; no, I don't believe that. That's directly contrary to everything that General Ely has told me.”

Q: How would you contrast that with the relationship that Lansdalhad with Trinh Minh Th#?

PHILLIPS: Well, that was a very interesting thing. I wasn't directly involved in it, but I know that Ed received an invitation to go up and visit Trinh Minh Th#. This was when Th# was still in dissidence, I mean, he wasn't having anything to do with anybody. He had broken off from the Cao Dai because he felt that the French were too dominant there, and he was

against the Viet Minh, against the French, and he wasn't for Diem, either. He wasn't for anybody. Except he was a real nationalist.

Ed went up to visit him at his invitation and spent all day up there, or maybe two days, with him. And they just talked and talked, and he asked him about Magsaysay and the experience in the Philippines, and they really got very close, personally. He asked him about Diem, and did he think he could trust Diem, and Ed said, “Well, I think so. I think this guy's a real nationalist.” As a result of that relationship, Ed was sort of the bridge between Trinh Minh Th# and Diem. Th# came in and decided to support Diem.

So during this famous Vietnamese Day national parade, he sent five thousand of his men down, and they marched in the parade. Very interesting, they didn't have enough shoes to go around so all the guys on the outside file wore the shoes.

Q: I heard that didn't help you with the French any.

PHILLIPS: No, well, there were a lot of things that—the Vietnamese didn't help us with the French, either, because they weren't above sort of razzing the French a little bit. One of the things they did was, they had a unit that went out and secretly learned the American manual of arms. So when they got in front of the reviewing stand, here's TRIM up there, all of the American and French brass, as well as the Vietnamese generals, this unit comes around, smartly stops, turns, does a right face, and then goes through the American manual of arms and, you know, oh, terrible. The French are gnashing their teeth. The Americans, honest to God, did not know anything about it. The Vietnamese did it deliberately just to stick a red-hot poker up the rear end of the French.

Q: And the military men would understand the psychic messages involved.

PHILLIPS: The psychic message—

(Laughter)

—caused all kinds of severe heartburn.

Q: And the French would be especially sensitive to something likthat, I would imagine.

PHILLIPS: Well, of course. There were some very sympathetic guys among the French. There was a fellow named [Jacques] Romaine-Defosses, who was the senior French guy —

Q: Could you spell that one? I'm not sure that I've come across him.

PHILLIPS: Romaine, R-O-M-A-I-N-E, D-E, dash, F-O-S-S-E-S.

Q: Okay. Got it.

PHILLIPS: Who was quite a gentleman, he really was. He had been in Vietnam for something like eighteen years, and he really felt very close to the Vietnamese and very strongly about them, and he was very—on the one hand, he didn't want them to go under, and on the other hand, this fact that he had this relationship with them, and here they were sort of courting the Americans, was a real problem for him, an emotional problem for him. One of the Frenchmen put it to me this way. He said, “To understand how we feel, how would you feel if you had a mistress, and you were very, very close to her. Finally, after this long relationship, you broke it off because really you couldn't afford to support her anymore. You're sitting in a sidewalk cafe, and the very next day she comes roaring by in this Cadillac with this American. (Laughter) How would you feel?” I said, “I wouldn't feel very good.” He said, “Now you understand how we feel.”

Q: That's a very French way of putting it, isn't it? That's good.

PHILLIPS: So there was a lot of that. And I remember getting into a long discussion with them about this whole situation. They were saying, “Well, you're doing it all wrong,” and I said, “Well, I don't know if we're doing it all wrong or not, but we're trying to help

these people, and you guys tried and you failed. I think the reason you failed was you never really let the Vietnamese be independent." They said, "We've always backed the Vietnamese." I said, "Well, let me ask you one question. Why did the French government make a deal with Ho Chi Minh at Fontainebleau which permitted the Viet Minh to get access to French Secret Service files, and to go out and round up thousands of Vietnamese nationalists and kill them? What kind of deal was that? You guys are still paying for that, you know." They didn't know I knew about this, and there was just a dead, dead silence.

You know, they were ashamed of a lot of things, too, and it was a painful thing for them, very, very painful. And I can understand why it was painful. A lot of them were good people who loved Vietnam, loved the Vietnamese, and they felt badly about Dien Bien Phu, and about abandoning the North, too; they felt very badly about that. Because when you really looked at the situation in Vietnam, the Viet Minh were almost as strong in the South as they were in the North. The old notion that somehow the Viet Minh were all up north, you see—they weren't. There was an awful lot of noncommunist North that was given up.

Q: Sure.

PHILLIPS: So it was a very tragic—then there was a lot of bitterness about Dien Bien Phu. I remember going into a nightclub with a couple of French officers. This one guy had been in Dien Bien Phu, captured and released by the Viet Minh. And [Christian de La Croix] de Castries shows up in a whole entourage of officers. And this guy had to be physically restrained from attacking de Castries.

Q: Wow!

PHILLIPS: He said, "That son of a bitch was drinking champagne, having champagne dropped in when our troops were dying," and oh, God, he was bitter. So you had all this kind of a reaction.

Q: The French were torn within and among themselves as well.

PHILLIPS: Sure. Yes. They really were.

Q: What were you doing in Laos?

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[Continuation of interview: May 27, 1982]

PHILLIPS: I was asked to go up there and start something that was called Civic Action. The Lao government under Souvanna Phouma was facing a problem in that they had concluded some accords with the Pathet Lao whereby the Pathet Lao were to be integrated into the government, there were to be elections. It was evident to the Lao themselves that they had really done nothing in the countryside in the way of village development, or anything that would justify any kind of popular support for the government, other than sort of residual loyalty to the king.

The basic idea was to try to duplicate some of the better elements of the experience in the Philippines and in Vietnam—the early experience—and see if civilian-military teams couldn't be recruited, trained, organized, and sent out to work in the villages, to help the villagers. This is basically what I did. I worked with a guy named Oudone Sananikone—O-U-D-O-N-E S-A-N-A-N-I-K-O-N-E—who was a lieutenant colonel in the army at the time, and who was a wonderful guy. We had some success with that program. But that mired down in all kinds of Lao politics and other problems.

I stayed there off and on for about two years. Then I left the government in 1959, went to work for my father in Airways Engineering. Then in 1962 I got a call from the director of AID, Far East, a guy named [Seymour] Janow, asking me whether I would come in and talk with them about helping them with something to do with Vietnam. I said, well, sure. So I went down to talk with them and they said, “We have a real problem with the AID mission

out in Vietnam. It's all concentrated in the cities, it has nothing going in the countryside, it's making no contribution to the counterinsurgency effort"—as it was called then—"and we want to see what can be done to make AID a participant and provide some real support. Would you be willing to go out there and take a look at what needs to be done with the AID mission and how it might be reorganized, what programs might be undertaken?" I said, "Well, I'll have to check." I talked with my father, who wasn't very happy about it because, I suspect, he could see me getting involved again, and of course I had had a rather deep and kind of continuing commitment to the Vietnamese to help them. And by that time I had a wife and two small kids, and she thought that I ought to do what I wanted to do, at least to go out there and see what could be done and whether it could be reorganized. I got the agreement of AID to tap a guy that I had known briefly in Laos, named Bert Fraleigh, who was a very experienced general-development person who'd been on Taiwan and who had been largely responsible for the success of the veterans' program in Taiwan.

Q: Was that part of AID?

PHILLIPS: That's a whole story in and of itself. It was AID-supported, but if you'll remember, the Gimo [Chiang Kai-shek] had literally thousands of veterans that had to be retired and had to be given something to do. The feeling at the time was that this was a hopeless situation, that these were basket cases. In fact, in about five years, just about every one of those people was gainfully employed doing something, and actually the largest construction firm on Taiwan and the one with the most overseas business right now is one called the Retired Serviceman's Engineering Agency, run by a fellow named Colonel Yin [?].

Anyway, I had known Bert because he came up to Laos on some rural development programs, and so I asked that he go with me. Together we formed a team. We went out there; we spent almost two months going all over the countryside, talking to various government ministries, going out and seeing what was actually happening in the countryside. And my report recommended a very radical overhaul of AID, with the creation

of a new rural affairs division, but at the level of assistant to the director so that it took its authority directly from the director.

Q: Who was the director of AID then?

PHILLIPS: A guy named Bill Phippen, who actually was the acting director. A guy named Gardner had been there, but he had come back. Bill was acting director and then—I'm trying to think of the fellow that came in who had been on Taiwan before; I'll think of his name in a minute—and he became the director.

Anyway, we came up with a new organization which would put representatives out in the provinces, working directly with the province chiefs. I had access to everybody in the Vietnamese government [Ngo Dinh] Diem on down. I saw Diem, I saw Nguyen Dinh Thuan, I saw everybody, and [Ngo Dinh] Nhu. I talked about a kind of a teamwork situation in which we would create a provincial coordinating committee composed of the province chief, the AID representative, and the military advisory group representative. They would be given a budget, including some contingency funds, for a variety of activities, which included everything ranging from hamlet self-help, to a school program, to emergency rebuilding of anything destroyed as a result of either Viet Cong or our own attacks, resettlement assistance for people who had to be or were resettled, assistance in training the hamlet militia.

The self-help program was a thing where we created a fund for each village, which they could use on a project that they wanted to build which they felt was most urgent for their hamlet or village. In order to qualify, you had to have an elected hamlet committee. Well, I presented all that to the Vietnamese and they were very enthusiastic about it. So this began to put some bones, so to speak, some flesh on the bones of what the Vietnamese had already started, which was the strategic hamlet program.

The program was sold to the Vietnamese; they asked me to come back; I gave a qualified answer. The same thing happened so far as the ambassador and the AID mission was

concerned. They endorsed the report. We also came up with a lot of other programs, agricultural development programs, all kinds of stuff, everything you can imagine that could have some material impact in the countryside.

Q: Would you describe this more as a reorganization, or were thermore funds being funneled in?

PHILLIPS: Yes, there were more funds being funneled in. In fact, there was a special fund created of ten million dollars' worth of piasters, which was a U.S. fund which was turned over to the Vietnamese to get this whole thing rolling. In addition, we tapped some existing USAID programs; in other words, we took funds that were in USAID programs, say, in the school program [that] were going to higher education, we put it into rural schools.

Q: How did you get around—the contingency fund would have presentesome bookkeeping problems, wouldn't it?

PHILLIPS: It presented a hell of a big problem, but they cleared it back here. I presented it as a way of getting this thing started and of going around the problem that the Vietnamese government had of their own procedures, which were so clumsy and required pre-audit up at the national level before a province chief could do anything. You couldn't go out and buy a load of charcoal without getting bids from three people, sending it to Saigon, and getting it approved before you made the award.

Q: Was this the French heritage?

PHILLIPS: I think some, yes. So the system was simply not functioning, and the province chiefs, the guys who really wanted to do something, they had to steal money to get the job done, and they were really upset about it. We got a good reception from the province chiefs. I mean, these ideas really were ones that I worked out and picked up from a lot of the people who were already working out in the field. In effect, in that way they reflected,

I think, reality in terms of needs and also what people could effectively accomplish, and it addressed the problem of constipation in the Vietnamese system. It just wasn't functioning.

The other thing that we did was instead of trying to deliver things like cement and sheet roofing and fertilizer and surplus goods that we got from the U.S. Defense Department—God, we got unbelievable amounts of almost anything you can think of, from parachuting to all kinds of cloth, blankets, which we were able to buy very cheaply because they were surplus. There was a Vietnamese agency that was run by a very, very capable and honest guy who used to distribute private relief supplies, and what he did was he used all commercial trucks. He had a real system. So we took four guys—initially only two and eventually we had a staff of four—and they went over and worked with this guy. And I think the records will show that in a year and a half we moved more stuff out to the countryside than AID ever succeeded in moving afterwards through their own channels, even when they had about five thousand people out there.

Q: To what do you attribute that?

PHILLIPS: Well, I attribute it to a lack of bureaucracy, frankly.

Q: (Laughter) Okay.

PHILLIPS: And also some ingenious use of a system in place. Sure, some of the private truckers in certain areas had to pay something to the VC, but they got the goods there.

We had four regional coordinators. The staff was almost entirely out in the countryside. I guess we had eventually about fifty guys, including those four coordinators out in the countryside, and we had about twelve in Saigon. And that's the way the thing was run, it was run very lean. The four coordinators were eventually replaced by four missions of five hundred to eight hundred at the regional level, but that's another story.

(Laughter)

Q: That's a terrible commentary.

PHILLIPS: Anyhow, on the way back, I was flown to Honolulu to participate in one of [Robert] McNamara's big flying circuses. This was August, I think.

Q: Of 1962?

PHILLIPS: 1962, yes. And I was asked to give a brief presentation of what we were doing, and he thought that was great. He'd never heard of hamlet elections, though, and so he thought that was good.

Q: The hamlet chiefs were still appointed, were they not?

PHILLIPS: They had been, but the Vietnamese actually—you know, one of the things I found out when I got out there is that as usual, nobody had read any of the stuff that the Vietnamese were putting out themselves on what they wanted to achieve with the strategic hamlet program. Well, one of the things they had in there was the idea that the hamlet chiefs ought to be elected. So I just picked up on that. That's kind of typical, that is that we come into a country and we don't know what they're doing, so we dream up a lot of ideas of our own. I tried to take the ideas that they had and build on them so that it was more their idea than our idea. And I think that we got around the sovereignty issue because—well, I think they trusted us, and particularly because I had been there with Ed [Lansdale] before, they trusted me, that I was trying to get something done that was really in their best interests.

Q: You'll pardon me for saying that really sounds like an engineer'approach to a problem.

PHILLIPS: An engineer's approach?

Q: Yes.

PHILLIPS: No, I don't think it's an engineer's approach. I don't know how to characterize it. I'd say, in a way, it was a highly political approach, because it appreciated Vietnamese sensibilities and capabilities. Yes. Well, that may be the most political way of all to approach it. Anyway, I came back and I got called over to the White House to talk to Mike Forrestal, and everybody wanted me to go out and run the program.

Q: This would have been fall, 1962?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, it was the end of August. Let's see, June, July—it was around the middle of August, yes, about the middle of August.

Well, I had kind of gotten myself in a position, I guess, where I couldn't really refuse. I mean, here I had created this program, I sold it to everybody—

Q: Did you want to refuse?

PHILLIPS: —and everybody wanted me to go back out there. Well, I had mixed emotions about it, but I was excited about the possibilities. I could see what could be done. I had some reservations about the political situation vis-a-vis Diem.

Q: What was that all about?

PHILLIPS: I had a lot of friends who were close to him, and who were disturbed because they felt that Nhu had effectively cut him off from a lot of his support and alienated a lot of people; that the political base of the government wasn't as broad or as solid as it ought to be and it was vulnerable, [and] that the President was too isolated, and that also there were some scandals. The monetary system was being milked by a guy who was one of Nhu's proteges, and this sort of stuff was not reflecting well on Diem. And he was oblivious to a lot of it.

I got some whiffs of this and frankly went back on a gamble that somehow maybe the political situation would improve, or if not, maybe we could get Ed out there, who was the only guy who really had any influence with Diem in the right sense of the word. In other words, he was, I think, the only American that Diem would either listen to or really pour his heart out to or talk to.

Q: He had made a trip in 1961, I think, Lansdale had, hadn't he, for Kennedy?

PHILLIPS: He made a trip earlier and then he went out in 1961, yes. He had quite an argument about what ought to be done out there, because he did not agree with the Taylor-Staley [Taylor-Rostow?] mission approach, which was pretty conventional: build up the conventional army. That was another thing that I found, you know, I didn't have time to dig into it too deeply, but I found pretty disturbing, and that was that the army was organized into corps and divisions, and they really were not very well geared to fighting the kind of war that was under way. And they didn't have the connection between the province chief and the forces in the province, and the regular army forces at division and corps were not at all good. There was a lot of poor intelligence, and some blind shelling and bombing going on, which was counterproductive. You could get a feel for some of that, but it was only when I went back and really got into it that I got the full impact of it.

Q: What about the local forces, the self-defense force and so forth?

PHILLIPS: In many areas they were good, but the problem was that you couldn't get very much coordination with the regular Vietnamese army forces, so that if the VC moved in some regular forces of their own at a weak point to overwhelm the locals, the Vietnamese army was nowhere to be found. It wasn't just that they were ducking combat. The whole thing was much too hierarchical and too stratified, and I think that basically the military mission—the guys that were working handling the provincial advisers, they understood the problem. But the guys in MACV were even then, I think, leaning to a very conventional point of view of the war.

Q: There was a common complaint, I think, heard, that the VC would knock off a local force post and then ambush the relieving force, and apparently this happened over and over and over.

PHILLIPS: Yes, that's true, but had the army been organized differently, as it was when we first got into Vietnam in 1954-55, had it been organized as a territorial force rather than in regiments, divisions, et cetera, which was frankly a useless kind of an organization for this sort of war—not only useless but counterproductive, because you could organize regimental and division sweeps and find nothing, and there was a lot of that going on.

Anyway, those were some of my worrisome kinds of impressions, but I thought that, well, if we could really get a development program going here, something that's really exciting that gets people motivated and stirred up, maybe we can salvage this thing.

So I came back and I agreed to go back out, and I started recruiting people immediately. A lot of these guys were young guys who I knew of. I got very few AID old hands. I got two guys I'd known up in Laos, who [had] worked for Tom Dooley. A third guy had been up there working in the army as part of a psywar company—

Q: Can I get these names from you later?

PHILLIPS: Yes, sure. Bob Burns [?] is the guy who was the psywaguy. He's an interesting guy to talk to. He's out in California.

I got John O'Donnell, who had also been briefly in the army, was part Hawaiian, a very young guy but was very interested in this kind of work. Bert Fraleigh turned up a couple of old friends of his. One guy who asked me almost the day after I arrived—he came over to USAID and volunteered—was a guy named Dave Hudson, who was a stringer for NBC. I never will forget this. Dave stopped me on the steps at USAID and asked me where could he find Rufus Phillips. I said, “You've found him.” He said, “I'm Dave Hudson and I want to volunteer to work for you.” I said, “That's great. What are you doing now?” He said, “I'm

a stringer for NBC. I've heard about what you're doing." I said, "Well, sounds fine to me, any guy that's that motivated. Where do you want to go?" He said, "Give me the toughest province you got." And I said, "You're going to Ca Mau." And that's where he went, he went down to Ca Mau. He was our chief liaison with Father Hoa down there.

Q: The Sea Swallows.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Anyhow, I just gave you a little bit of that to give you some flavor of how this group was made up. They were made up of very highly motivated people. We got twelve young guys from IVS, from the International Volunteer Service, who had already been in Vietnam, who were working strictly on agricultural projects. A couple of those guys, who were only about twenty-two or twenty-three, were the best people we had.

I put them out there; they were working with colonels and majors, and I gave them all the responsibility. I said, "Here's your job." We wrote up a manual for them, to give them some idea of what the sort of philosophical framework was and what we were going to try to achieve, what kind of programs we were going to be carrying out, and we just let them loose. Many of them did splendidly, I mean, they really were extraordinary. John O'Donnell we put down with the touchiest province chief that we had to work with but who was also the best, who was Colonel [Tran Ngoc] Chau, the guy that got thrown in jail by [Nguyen Van] Thieu, and then when the Viet Cong came in—supposedly because he had a Viet Cong brother; he did have a Viet Cong brother—

Q: Pham Ngoc Thao?

PHILLIPS: Pham Ngoc Thao, yes.

Q: The one I'm thinking of had been province chief, I think, of LonAn. No, of Kien Hoa.

PHILLIPS: One of our first sessions—I started working with a Colonel Hoang Van Loc who was acting as the chief of staff for the strategic hamlet program. We decided that

what we'd do was call in the province chiefs, talk to them about their program and develop the program with them. So we called in Chau, one of the first guys we talked to, because he said, “This guy's really good.” Chau came in, and Chau immediately launched into a speech about how he didn't want any American aid, he didn't want anybody in his province, he was doing fine, he didn't need any help. So I said, “Well, Colonel, first of all, we don't want to come in and change what you're doing. I've been in Vietnam before, and we just want to try to figure out the ways and means of supporting you. You tell us what it is you're doing and we'll figure out how to build a program around that and provide you with some help.” So he started launching into the various types of things that he was doing, and I said, “Basically, the ideas that we have kind of fit into that framework. If you want to do this, you can use this section of the program to do that.” So he warmed up. Then I said, “Our idea is to give you the flexibility to deploy these funds and use these funds without having to come back to Saigon. So what we're going to do is set this committee up down there. It's really your committee, and I'll send a representative down there to work with you.”

Well, he and I became close friends over a period of time and he told me later, “You know, you sent John O'Donnell down here, and here comes this freckle-faced kid that doesn't look more than about fifteen, and I said to myself what are they doing? Do they know what they're doing? I don't need any babies down in this province, I've got enough problems.” And he said, “You know, John was quiet and unassuming and a good listener, and in about three months' time, I came to depend on him more than any single person in that province, including my deputy or any other Vietnamese.”

There's a guy who's coming up here in July; he's still working for AID, he's down in Peru. He's the only AID employee decorated by the Peruvians for service to Peru in the last fifteen years. He's a wonderful guy, and you should talk to him.

Q: What's his name?

PHILLIPS: John O'Donnell.

Q: Oh, John O'Donnell. I've got him down. He's going to be here iJuly?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: I'll see if I can arrange a trip.

PHILLIPS: He's coming, I guess it's about mid-July; he's coming bacfor reassignment, so he's going to be here.

Q: Would you spell that colonel's name, Chau?

PHILLIPS: C-H-A-U. I just use that by way of illustration. We got a number of things [that] really were going well. The so-called strategic hamlet program went a lot better in the center of Vietnam than it did in the south. There had been, by the time we got involved, too much sort of massive relocation of people in a number of provinces, Long An being one of them, and to try to straighten that out and to try to compensate people and so forth was a long and painful process.

There were some provinces, like Kien Hoa, where the province chiefs were really good. I think that there was no province chief who was up to the level of Chau, but gradually you could see progress being made in terms of area pacified, people supporting the government, in terms of your ability to go into these areas day and night. The area was expanding, and continued to expand, and there were a number of provinces in central Vietnam where this was going on at a very good rate, until the government hit the Buddhist crisis in the late spring and early summer of 1963. Then things became pretty well paralyzed and then started to go backwards.

Q: That was a real watershed, then, the Buddhist crisis?

PHILLIPS: Yes, that was a watershed in that the way it was handled alienated an awful lot of support that Diem had, particularly in the army itself. Nhu was kind of the guy who had the most influence and sort of master- minded the government's campaign against the Buddhists. He had some very warped and peculiar views of what was going on. It led into real errors in the way that thing was handled. It could have been, I think, resolved early on. Diem was even at one point willing to go up to Hue and sit down with the Buddhist leaders, and I think maybe that might have resolved the thing, but he didn't do it and it just went from bad to worse.

In the meantime, we started out—for example, one of the kinds of programs we had was a program of distributing an improved breed of piglets to farm families in the center, many of whom had never had a cash crop in their lives. We actually instituted simultaneously five major changes in the way the Vietnamese raised pigs. Not only were these pigs different, they were fed sweet potato cuttings, which was different; they were put in concrete pigpens, which was different; the pigpens were cleaned out constantly, which was different; they were not permitted to run loose; they were inoculated, and they grew about twice as big, twice as fast. The result was that we started early in 1963 with this program, and by June of 1963, we had distributed pigs to something like thirty thousand families. We were fortunate in that there had been a—the one thing that AID had done was they had started some agriculture experimental stations, and they had a fair amount of breeding stock to begin with, and then we supplemented that from the Philippines and elsewhere that we knew would do well in Vietnam. We had them flown in.

The impact was really quite something in central Vietnam, because all of a sudden you had farm families that literally had never had any money before in their lives being able to sell these hogs on market. You could see the impact in the villages in terms of people taking old straw huts and beginning to put up houses with brick in them, and this kind of thing. It was quite something. This was the kind of thing we were doing.

We had another program of fertilizer. We distributed an enormous amount of fertilizer and improved crop yields incredibly. We had some Taiwanese technicians, who were the best agricultural technicians, who not only got the Vietnamese—well, they got them growing soybeans in a number of areas and that was a good cash crop. Their technique was really good. What they'd do was that they wouldn't set up a model farm or anything like that. They would try to find somebody who was a poor to average farmer in a village, and somebody who was willing to work with them, too. But they'd deliberately not pick the guy who was successful, they'd pick some guy who was not successful, or not particularly successful. They'd work with him, and he would do it; he would raise the soybeans and sell them, and all of a sudden he'd have money in his hand. Then you couldn't keep these people away from the door of the Chinese technicians with a stick. Everybody came around and said, “We want to get in on this because, hell, if he can do it, I can.”

Q: That's clever, yes.

PHILLIPS: And it was the same thing—that's why the pig program spread so rapidly was we deliberately picked people who were the poorest. In some cases the guy didn't even have any land, had to rent the land to put his pigpen on. In one case, a guy tore down his house to build a pigpen! That's the only land he had was this straw hut; he built a pigpen instead of the hut, and he stayed in one part of the pigpen and the pigs in the other. I kid you not.

Q: That takes a strong stomach, I know. Anybody who's been arounpigs knows that.

PHILLIPS: Anyhow, that was the real exciting part, and I feel to this day that had somehow we been able to keep that kind of thing going, and the Diem government had not gotten into such serious political problems, political trouble, we might have been able to pull it off.

That's just kind of an overview of the kinds of things—

Q: That's fine. I'm wondering what it was about the Buddhist crisis that connected it to the strategic hamlet program. My impression is—it may be wrong—

PHILLIPS: The only thing that connected it was the fact that the—and its impact was particularly felt around Saigon or wherever the Buddhists were strong, like up in Hue. It was felt around Saigon—the army was paralyzed. They were all in the barracks. Nobody wanted to move any troops anyplace; they didn't want to move them out to provide security, so a lot of hamlets were left unprotected.

Q: And got knocked off.

PHILLIPS: And got knocked off. Demoralization started to set in.

Q: What about the stories you hear about the bad reporting that wacoming out of the field on some sides, about progress?

PHILLIPS: The problem was that the military tended to report things that were not significant. They were things that McNamara wanted to hear about, like in the regular army operations, how many bodies did they count and how many weapons did they recover, and all that wasn't relevant to anything that was really happening of any importance. And of course, the Vietnamese, like anybody else, if that's how you're going to measure my performance, I'm going to exaggerate. Anybody who gets in the line of fire is a VC, so that's a body. And of course that just proliferated to the nth degree when we got big forces in there; it's the same thing. But it had already started.

The other thing was that, sure, the hamlet—a lot of the province chiefs tended to exaggerate their progress to Saigon, to look good. We put out a report—the first report was in June—in which we did a first, I think, province-by-province assessment of the program. And it was quite critical in many areas. It also said where it was going good. Not only [did] we put this out, but we gave it to the Vietnamese. I had it translated into French

and sent it to Diem, because I thought they should know what we thought about what was going on and that they should have an accurate idea of what the problems were.

These reports became a kind of a cause celebre, because later on McNamara said, “Why was I never shown any of these reports?” Well, they didn't fit into the conventional reporting system, for which he had been so responsible to begin with and which didn't have much meaning. These were more kinds of evaluations and intangible assessments, not numbers.

Q: Now, did these reports stop at you and Diem, or were thecoordinated—?

PHILLIPS: No, we sent them to everybody. We sent them to the Ambassador, we sent them to [Paul] Harkins, we sent them to everybody, but they didn't get into the reporting system as it existed.

The other thing is that people like [Victor] Krulak used to come over, and they'd only talk to the colonels and the generals, and all they'd hear was the good news. So that's all he heard. And I have to say, there were some—I attended one briefing up in—what's the name of that area to the north and west of Bien Hoa?

Q: An Loc?

PHILLIPS: No, not An Loc. The Iron Triangle it's called, the famous Iron Triangle, where the VC traditionally, going back to the thirties, even, had some significant organization. They had a lot of underground tunnels and everything else. They launched a big operation up there, a big sweep, and search and destroy. They came rolling in with troop carriers and tanks and everything else. I think they encountered about two or three VC during the whole thing. Occasionally some VC would poke his head up out of the hole and take a shot at somebody. After this was over, they had a briefing there when Krulak came out, and I attended this briefing. It was given by a Colonel Miller. It was all of this business about how many forces were deployed, and how they had smashed the VC infrastructure

in the Iron Triangle, and so forth and so on. I went up to him afterwards and I said, “I've just been out there, and I've talked to some of your people that have been out there on the ground. I don't know what place it is you're talking about, and what great victory it is you're talking about, but it sure as hell didn't happen out there. I don't know why you're telling this bullshit”—you know, I really got upset about it—”to people coming in here from Washington.” He said, “Well, this is all the statistics and blah blah blah.” Yes, you know, he wanted to look good; it was a big operation. But it was meaningless, absolutely meaningless.

Q: I'm trying to remember if that's the Operation Rising—

PHILLIPS: No, no. Rising Sun was the first resettlement-pacificatiothing that was started before Harkins even got out there.

Q: [Lionel] McGarr was still there then.

PHILLIPS: McGarr was still there.

Anyway, that's to try to answer your question.

Q: Okay. It was a question of security then? The Buddhists—PHILLIPS: I think the question of bad reporting had to do with the fact that the way the reporting system was set up, the way the whole U.S. effort was structured, the hierarchical nature of it, the fact that it was very hard for the kind of a feel that the province military adviser had to get through to the top, because it didn't fit into a form. You go down there and he could give you a reading very fast on what was going on. This accounted for this big blowup in the NSC when I came back and Krulak was saying we are winning the war, especially in the Delta.

Q: Let's talk about that.

PHILLIPS: I said we weren't, and I'd just been down in Long An province two days before and the provincial adviser had said, “We're in bad shape.”

Q: This is the military adviser?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Let me tell you what happened. The VC in the last week came into two hundred hamlets, at night. They made the people take down the barbed wire fence, made them destroy their own houses. I've got people out there with no security now. I can't get the army to provide them with any security. These hamlets are just destroyed. They're there still and some of the people have left. And he gave me a statistic on how much barbed wire had been cut into pieces. God, it was kilometers and kilometers.

So I just reeled all this off because I'd just been there. Well, that provoked a real confrontation. McNamara was shaking his head the whole time I was talking about that. And then the reason—what happened was that Krulak had gone to the Delta, basically, and around Saigon, presenting the military side. Then you had Joe Mendenhall spending most of his time up in Hue, who had excellent contact with the total “outs,” the real dissidents, so far as presenting a political point of view, purely political. And Kennedy did say, “Did you two guys go to the same country?” Because there's no way that you could match these two guys [up].

Then the President was told that I was there, and did he want to listen to what I had to say, and he said yes. So I said, “Well, I don't like to contradict General Krulak, but I have to tell you, Mr. President, that we're not winning the war, particularly in the Delta. The troops are paralyzed, they're in the barracks, and this is what is actually going on in one province that's right next to Saigon.” And I recited it. Then I went on to say that the Buddhist crisis was a real crisis, that I was very concerned about the political situation, that I thought that eventually, if somehow this thing wasn't resolved, that we might have a coup on our hands

by the army. And I thought that was a disaster and that Diem should be saved, and that the only way to do that, in my opinion, was to persuade Diem to get Nhu and Madame Nhu out of the country. That they were the chief source of the problem, and that there was only one guy that I thought could do that, and that was General Lansdale, and I suggested he send him out there as soon as possible.

Well, I'm giving you a resume of what I said. None of that part of it, by the way, is in that Bromley Smith memorandum. At the end of it he thanked me very much and said, “I want to particularly thank you for your recommendation concerning General Lansdale.” That's the last of that.

Q: That was the last of that—

PHILLIPS: That's the last of that.

Q: —until 1965, I guess.

PHILLIPS: Yes. But there's a lot of water that went over the dam.

Q: I think [David] Halberstam says that the province adviser that you referred to got in some hot water.

PHILLIPS: Did he ever, man!

Q: Tell me about that.

PHILLIPS: Well, I wasn't there, but I was told when I got back things were pretty chilly with MACV, and I was told that MACV was turned upside down for two days to prove that I was a liar, that I was wrong. They found out that I had gone down there and talked to that provincial adviser, and that poor guy was yanked out of there.

Q: What ever became of him, do you know?

PHILLIPS: He was reassigned somewhere. I don't know that his careewas permanently damaged, but it certainly didn't do him any good.

Q: Earl Young, I have that name noted down.

PHILLIPS: Yes, Earl was—I'm trying to recall whether Earl was—yes,we had just sent Earl down there. He was the provincial rep.

Q: Down to Long An?

PHILLIPS: Yes. He sat in on our discussion. He's a witness to—

(Laughter)

The funniest thing about it is that after all this foofaraw, when McNamara and [Maxwell] Taylor went out—they went out on a special mission, later, I think it was in September, or early October—he got confirmation of everything that I had told him, that I had said was true, including the statistics on the barbed wire.

(Laughter)

Q: That was one statistic they would rather not report, I guess. DiGeneral Krulak jump you during that meeting for your contribution?

PHILLIPS: I remember more of McNamara. I think at one point we mahave clashed. I don't remember that, to be honest with you.

Q: Was McGeorge Bundy there? Do you remember anything that he mahave contributed?

PHILLIPS: No, he didn't say much.

Q: Okay. There are several versions of that meeting extant, in thliterature.

PHILLIPS: I know there are.

Q: Halberstam has one; John Mecklin has a very abbreviated one, anlet's see, Roger Hilsman—

PHILLIPS: Roger Hilsman has one.

Q: Hilsman and Halberstam are very close.

PHILLIPS: Fairly close.

Q: In fact, the phrasing is even the same in some instances. It makes it hard to think that there wasn't some collaboration, or interviewing. Did Halberstam interview you at all?

PHILLIPS: No, he did not. So I don't know, he must have gotten some of this from the guys up with Kennedy, maybe some of it from Hilsman. Hilsman's book came out first, you know.

Q: Yes. Before I came down I compared the two accounts, and they'rstriking in their similarity.

Okay, then you went back.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, the reason I had come to Washington was not having any thing to do with this, but my father was very ill. He was actually dying of cancer and my mother urged me to come back, of course, and I did.

Q: When did you go back to Vietnam then?

PHILLIPS: I stayed here for a week or so and then I went back, and at that point I decided I would have to leave. I sent my wife and children on ahead of me and I stayed on to kind

of clean up. That period happened to coincide with the coup. I left about a week or so after the coup.

Q: After the coup? Where were you when the coup took place?

PHILLIPS: I was over at a friend's house.

Q: In Saigon?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: Can you recall the action?

PHILLIPS: I can remember a couple of things. One was that I had been in to see Diem about two days before. Everybody at that point knew that something was in the wind, and I remember very poignantly—one of the reasons I had gone to see him was, one, to sort of bring him up to date on what was happening with the strategic hamlet program, and, two, I had been attacked personally in the Saigon Post or Times that was a Nhu-run newspaper, claiming that I was going to take over from John Richardson and I was secretly the new head of the CIA. (Laughter)

Q: That brush seems to tar an awful lot of people.

PHILLIPS: Actually, that got picked up, by the way—this is one of those ironies, believe it or not—Malcolm Browne picked this thing up in a damn newspaper article, as if it had some verisimilitude to it.

Anyhow, Nhu was going bananas at this point, plotting counter coups, and there were hit lists of people being published—I mean, not published, but there was a crazy brother of Madame Nhu's in the palace, and he was running around saying “We've got an assassination list,” and he gave it to Denis Warner, who gave it to me. I passed it on to the embassy. Oh, you talk about—I did it, in a way, for fun, because I knew this guy was

a nut, but I sent it on down to the embassy, anyway, and Jesus, you ought to see the—everybody went aaagh!

(Laughter)

Q: I heard that John Mecklin's name was at the top of the list fairly consistently.

PHILLIPS: No, I don't think John's was. Well, yes, I guess he was on it. But part of the irony was that they put Richardson on the damn list, and Richardson had been very close to Nhu. But anyway, it was a nutty period.

But I wanted to go in and talk to Diem because I wanted to set him straight about what I had said in Washington, and the fact that what I tried to do and was unable to do in terms of getting Ed out. You know, he was always very, very nice with me.

Q: Did Diem want Lansdale back?

PHILLIPS: Yes, badly. Jesus. The first time I came out there, in July of 1962, he asked me what I could do, and I went over and talked to the Ambassador about it, and I really couldn't get much movement.

Q: Why not?

PHILLIPS: Everybody thought that they had everything under control. I talked to them again about it later on. I must have talked to [Frederick] Nolting about it at least three times, as things got worse. Anyway—

Q: There's a rumor that Kennedy was thinking of appointing Lansdalambassador at one point.

PHILLIPS: No, at one point not rumor, he actually proposed him, anI think it got vetoed by both [Dean] Rusk and McNamara, I'm not sure.

Q: Why?

PHILLIPS: Rusk, because he was not a foreign service guy. Q: He wasn't a diplomat.

PHILLIPS: He was viewed as antidiplomat. I mean, he was a nonestablishment, nonforeign-service, kind of antitypical foreign service.

Q: Breaker of bureaucratic crockery?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Unconventional.

Q: And, too, I suppose, if you have Lansdale, what's the use ohaving another ambassador? I can see that, too.

PHILLIPS: That was the reason not to send him out in a lesser position, and the reason not to send him in as ambassador was that he didn't fit their picture of what an ambassador should be, of course, which was not what we needed in Vietnam anyway. We didn't need a regular ambassador in Vietnam.

Well, I was just telling you that I went in to see him, and one of the things that he poignantly asked me was, “Are the military planning a coup?” And I looked at him and I said, “Yes, sir, I think they are.”

Q: What did you base that on?

PHILLIPS: Just a feeling, and the news, and I had friends. Lou Conein's a personal friend of mine, so I had some feeling of what was going on.

He didn't ask me anything more. He knew pretty well what was happening to him. It was just sad, it was pathetic. I really went away feeling just down in the dumps. And then when the coup came, the next morning I went into the palace. Of course, it was all shot to hell. The chairs that we were sitting in were all sort of thrown all over the goddamn place, with a

couple of artillery holes and—sad. God, you know, I wanted to sit down and cry. And I was so upset when I heard that he'd been killed.

Q: A lot of people were. Apparently Kennedy was highly agitated. Of course, you were in an agitated state at this time, but did you think the situation could still be salvaged?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I thought so. I thought so, even after Diem went down. But the more we built up, the more we became involved with conventional forces, the less sanguine I became.

Q: Because it was less of a Vietnamese war?

PHILLIPS: Yes, because we were obviously going down the road of the French, even though we didn't mean to, and that wasn't our intent. We were certainly painting a picture in a way that made it very difficult for the Vietnamese to claim that they were the government, that they were running anything. And that just helped the VC politically.

Q: You'd known Big [Duong Van] Minh, I presume, hadn't you?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: What was your estimate of his capability?

PHILLIPS: I liked Big Minh; he had a lot of political charm. But he wasn't a terribly decisive guy. Somehow, I think that if we had been able to get in and work with—also I think he suffered from the fact that Diem had been killed, because that just alienated the Catholics. There's no way that he was going to enjoy their trust.

Q: Did he order Diem's death, do you think?

PHILLIPS: I don't know. That is very, very obscure as to how the hell that all came about. That was a stupid decision and, God, we paid, they paid, everybody paid.

Q: Who do you think knows the answer to that? Does Lou Conein know?

PHILLIPS: I'm not sure Lou does; I've talked to him about it and it's still very obscure. I mean, they know who did it, but they don't know who gave the order.

Q: Who did it, that aide?

PHILLIPS: Yes. I've forgotten what the guy's name is.

Q: I can't remember his name either.

PHILLIPS: He got killed, of course, not very long afterward. Hilife expectancy was very low from that moment on.

Q: He was an embarrassment.

PHILLIPS: Of course.

Q: So you came back about a week, ten days or so, after the coup?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: What were you doing then, when you came back?

PHILLIPS: I came back because my father died, and I took over the firm. I continued as kind of a consultant to AID part-time. They were hoping that maybe I could go back. I didn't know what state the business was in. I found it was in terrible condition and really required —my mother was widowed, and I really had a lot of things to look after and I just couldn't go back. I did help them recruit people as additional provincial reps, and one of them was Vann.

Q: John Paul Vann. How did you—?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, I had known him out there. We had some mutual respect for each other, and I had heard he was retired and where he was, and I just called him on the phone and said, “Look, I don't know whether I'm going back, but in the meantime the program's being run by Bert Fraleigh, my deputy, and AID—I've talked to them, and they'd really like to have you out there. I think you're the kind of person who would enjoy doing this. You always were oriented towards action at the local level and in the provinces.” As a matter of fact, his MOS [Military Occupation Specialty], if I recall correctly, was both infantry and military government. So—

Q: I think he had an advanced degree in political science.

PHILLIPS: Yes, he did. And he was very interested in what we were doing. So he said, “Well, I'll seriously consider it.” He came to Washington and decided to do it. So I was delighted to see that.

Q: Was the military delighted to see him come back, I wonder?

PHILLIPS: Well, you know, they accepted him.

Q: Did they?

PHILLIPS: Yes. I think some things that—well, Harkins was still there, but still he was accepted.

Q: Did you know Vann's military boss—?

PHILLIPS: “Coal Bin Willie” Wilson? No, Coal Bin Willie was not hiboss.

Q: No, he was a full colonel and he helped create IV Corps when themade a fourth corps.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Who was he?

Q: He is a professorial full colonel from Texas A&M [University],Daniel Boone Porter.

PHILLIPS: Yes, I think I remember him.

Q: I'd heard he was involved in a controversy recently, becausHalberstam had cited him as one of his main sources the other day in—

PHILLIPS: What, Ap Bac, or what?

Q: Yes. On the Ap Bac.

PHILLIPS: The famous Ap Bac situation?

Q: Yes. And Colonel Porter was just appalled. What about Ap Bac? Dyou know any of the story to that?

PHILLIPS: No. No more than—

Q: What's been printed?

PHILLIPS: I know that Vann was outraged, because he felt that—oh,what's the name of the general that I knew very well?

Q: [Huynh Van] Cao?

PHILLIPS: Yes, Cao. Because Cao was the presidential aide back in 1955. Cao had not handled the thing properly and [had] refused to really go in and close.

Q: Did Vann talk to Halberstam?

PHILLIPS: I would guess he did, but I don't know. There's a guy named Neil Sheehan who was out there who's doing a book on Vann, and I don't know what's happened to Nell's book, because it hasn't appeared.

Q: My understanding is that he has either expanded it into or laiit down to write the book on Vietnam.

PHILLIPS: Oh, really?

Q: That's my understanding. I don't have that from him, but I have it from a couple of people who know him, and that this is going to press a year from this fall.

PHILLIPS: Well, we've got Vietnam blossoming out all over. You've got this current TV series, you've got one that the—I think folks up in Boston have produced—

Q: WGBH, right.

PHILLIPS: That will be on—

Q: Have you watched any of the episodes that are on?

PHILLIPS: No, I meant to watch the second one and I just didn't get around to it. That was the early years, and I have no idea what the hell it—you know, when they show Wilfred Burchett in the first episode, boy, I'm already turned off.

(Interruption)

Q: You were saying that you knew Wilfred Burchett?

PHILLIPS: Well, he was posing as a legitimate journalist but then reporting, of course, totally the communist side of it, going all the way back to 1954-55. And he did the same thing in Laos. He would file reports somewhere up on the Lao-Hanoi border, “Dateline so-and-so, with the peaceful Lao forces,” when the North Vietnamese had had a hundred thousand troops in Laos.

(Laughter)

Oh, Jesus. The only thing that bugs me is that this guy gets quoted as being some kind of legitimate reporter when he's nothing but a propaganda mouthpiece, and never has been, has always been—he's interesting to read, because he does tell you a lot of details about how the VC operated and what they were doing. And you're right, you use him for that and you can get some fairly accurate stuff, but ....

Q: Well, he talked about the use of camouflage and how effective they were with that, and the development of the [Ho Chi Minh] Trail over the years and things like that. He doesn't look anything like what I thought he would look like, however. PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: I understand the well-fed sort of—

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: He looks like a very large man. Now, you came back and you took up the reins of your family business. I imagine you followed Vietnamese affairs in the newspapers and so on.

PHILLIPS: I did, of course, and then I was in touch with Ed and other guys who'd been in Vietnam, and we had a series of meetings about what to do and published some papers. Also, I went down to see [Hubert] Humphrey. I got in a—you know, Humphrey was the only guy that really would listen.

Q: Really?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes, and he became a very strong proponent of sending Ed out there. Finally, Johnson kind of gave in and said, “All right, send your goddamn Lansdale out there.”

Q: Is that a quote?

(Laughter)

PHILLIPS: I think that's a quote, yes. You might ask Bill Connell.

Q: Okay.

PHILLIPS: William Connell, C-O-N-N-E-L-L, who runs a film-making operation here in town. He was Humphrey's assistant. He lives out in Bethesda.

Q: All right, I've got him. Why was Johnson taking that attitude?

PHILLIPS: I don't know. You know, I think in part because Johnson had some very funny ways of—you know, he would spend all this time listening to Barbara Ward on Vietnam, who knew nothing, and he never asked anybody in who knew anything about Vietnam, and I never have to this day figured that out, quite. I think that he felt that the people he relied on were the top of the profession and knew what was going on, and that he didn't have to talk to any of the minions. Why he didn't extrapolate from his political experience—I mean, he'd never make that mistake if he were going out to Waterloo, Iowa or something. He would talk to the local political guys, or he'd find somebody who knew the local political situation, but somehow he never extrapolated his political experience in the United States to trying to deal with what was a highly political situation in Vietnam. I think that in part that was because he was relying on some very conventional thinkers, and also people whose experience had been shaped by World War II in Europe, like Maxwell Taylor, and who had the notion that you kind of land your forces and go inland and conquer the country and kill the enemy and win the war.

Q: These were years of frustration for you then.

PHILLIPS: Yes, they were, very frustrating. Because we thought that General [Nguyen] Khanh, with all of his defects, still had something going for him, and at one point, if it were handled properly and you had elections for a constituent assembly and some other things, that you could start to build a political base in South Vietnam, for the effort against the VC.

Then when Ed went out, I was involved in helping them, I went out foa month with them and helped the team get started.

Q: This was in 1965?

PHILLIPS: Yes, and then I went back out in 1966 for about a montand in 1967, just to—

Q: Would you compare those visits, what you saw, what conclusions—?

PHILLIPS: In 1965, that was the beginning and there was some hope that maybe Ed would have some real political responsibility. By 1966, he had gotten in with the Revolutionary Development guy, the general (Thanh) who had a lot of promise and who had a little touch of [Ramon] Magsaysay about him. Oh, what was his name? You know who I'm talking about, I just can't—

Q: It wasn't Major [Nguyen] Be?

PHILLIPS: No. Major Be worked for him.

Q: I can't call him up.

PHILLIPS: This guy had a feel for people and a real love for people, he really had something. Then he got into trouble because he backed [Nguyen Cao] Ky instead of Thieu.

But things were still, I think, semihopeful in 1966, because there were the elections for the constituent assembly, and this stirred up a lot of interest. Ed had sold the idea of this constituent assembly thing, of writing a constitution and getting elections started, and he'd gotten—you know, there were a number of good people, including Chau, [who] ran. He ran—it was very interesting. Here was a guy who'd been in that province, and who had been out of the province, without a responsibility for about a year or two, and who went back and ran from that province and won. It'll give you an idea that this guy really had done

something down there. He ran as an independent, too, I mean, he was not tied in with Thieu or Ky or any kind of faction.

That was a period of some hope and excitement, of maybe some kind of a political cause could be—some sort of spark could be struck. But then it sort of foundered because in part the Vietnamese didn't know quite what to do with it. Ed had some wonderful ideas, which I think the Vietnamese would have been very enthusiastic about, but he couldn't get those sold through the mission.

Q: Why not?

PHILLIPS: He was opposed by Habib, who—well, there was a power struggle going on and, see, he was treading on everybody's turf. Advising the constituent assembly was obviously the function of the political section of the embassy.

Q: And that was Phil Habib.

PHILLIPS: If it had anything to do with public information, it was Barry Zorthian's function. If it had anything to do with AID, it was some body else's function. Well, the truth was that these functions were all very narrowly seen and very nonoperative in nature, and very detached from the Vietnamese, and very unknowing of what the Vietnamese were capable of, or even how you light a fire like this. So the result was that the thing just sort of—you know, the steam sort of petered out of this and it became a kind of conventional deal where it was a power struggle between Thieu and Ky and eventually resolved in Thieu's favor.

Q: It seems to me that Lansdale would have been pretty frustrated, too.

PHILLIPS: He was very frustrated. I remember him coming back—maybe it was when I went out in 1967—after a meeting of the Mission Council, saying, “I don't know what

country they're talking about down there, but it sure as hell isn't Vietnam.” That's the Mission Council in the country, not the cabinet back here.

Q: Do you know anything about the later pacification efforts, thCORDS and the Phoenix-?

PHILLIPS: I know it got bigger and bigger, and presumably better, and certainly they achieved some degree of coordination, but I think it became so big and so unwieldy and it still—you know, where's the political base? If you don't have the political base, it doesn't make any difference what you're doing.

Q: Right.

PHILLIPS: Also, the American military effort and advisory effort was getting so massive that I'm not sure that anybody had it under control and knew what was going on. It's a little like [David] Stockman talking about the budget. I mean, what do all these figures mean? Nobody knows what they mean. I remember in 1967—was it 1967? Yes, September 1967—this friend of mine, who was a journalist, a Vietnamese, told me that—this was just after they had had a big pacification program around Vietnam, and before that they'd had some big program where they were going to create—I mean, I'm giving you quotes now—”rings of steel” around Saigon.

Q: HOP TAC? Was that one of them?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I think HOP TAC. I think it was HOP TAC. He said, “There's a very interesting thing happened just outside of Saigon, outside of Cholon. There was some militia down there that were manning these posts in this one village, or hamlet. The VC ambushed them, killed fifteen of them, and there were dead and wounded out there, and the rest of them retired inside of their post and nobody got to them for eight hours.” I said, “What?” And he said, “Yes. That's what I hear.” I said, “Can you take me down there? I'd like to talk to these guys and find out.” He said, “Sure.” So he drove by the next morning in his quatre-chevaux, you know, one of those old Renaults, and we went down there.

We just drove down there, drove out on this narrow road, four miles out of Saigon, to this little hamlet out there. Jesus, we got to the hamlet, it was about ten o'clock in the morning. Not a soul. Everybody was closeted inside the post; they're still terrified. So I go and ask some questions through him and also in French with one guy there, the lieutenant, who spoke some French, and we went out and looked at where they'd set the claymore mine for the ambush, and so forth and so on, and he described the whole thing to me. I said, “You didn't get any relief for eight hours?” He said, “No.” I said, “I don't understand this, you're only four miles from Saigon.” He said, “We don't depend on Saigon. We depend on the regimental headquarters over in Long An.” I said, “Well, now, tell me exactly what the distance is.” He said, “Well, it's about twenty-five kilometers thataway across the rice paddies.”

Q: No road?

PHILLIPS: No road. I said, “This is very strange. I mean, this doesn't make any sense.” So I went back and I wrote this up, and I gave a report to Ed. Ed took it into the Mission Council and passed it around. [William] Westmoreland got upset, very indignant, said that this can't be true, pounded on the desk. So Ed said, “Well, why don't you send somebody out there you trust to find out?” So he appointed a general. Well, the general we knew pretty well; I've forgotten his name now. So I said sure. I called up my friend An [?], and I said, “An, we've got a visitor who wants to go out with us and see the same thing.” So the general shows up in civvies, and An shows up in a taxi, saying, “My car broke down. I don't have a car; we'll have to take a taxi.” I said, “All right, I'll pay for the taxi, let's go.” So we had a damn general, you know, he had his .45 inside of his shirt—(Laughter)—who thought maybe he was going to get ambushed out there, or kidnaped or something. And we all went out there. And we interviewed the same people. He turned in the same report, said, “Yes, that's true.” Not a goddamn thing happened. If you want to know why the VC were able to put major forces in and around Saigon and get them into Saigon during the Tet offensive in 1968, there's the answer. All right? That's the kind of security system they were operating. Part of it had to do with politics. They didn't want all of the

security forces in Saigon, you know. But still, it was stupid, and the American command was so insensitive, I mean, so hierarchical, bureaucratic. You know, the whole thing was so overblown that something like this that should have illuminated a real problem for them, an obvious problem, because, hell, if you could do that, you could put anybody in and around Saigon, large forces, and nobody could ever know about it. And they didn't do a thing about it. I remember that well. That one I really remember.

Q: Do you remember an Australian colonel named Francis Serong?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes, sure.

Q: He was supposed to be some kind of a guerrilla expert. Was thawhat he was?

PHILLIPS: Yes, he had had a lot of experience in Malaysia.

Q: In Malaysia?

PHILLIPS: Yes. He was a nice guy. Ted Serong.

Q: What was his capacity in Vietnam? Was he with the Australiaadvisory group?

PHILLIPS: He was, I think, in the military attach#'s office, in kind of a part of the Australian advisory mission.

Q: He's been quoted as saying, in May of 1963, that the strategic hamlet program is overextended, leaves too many blank spots, things in that line, and General Krulak is supposed to have challenged him on that. Do you remember any incident involving this?

PHILLIPS: No. But I think we were saying pretty much essentially thsame thing, particularly in the Delta.

Q: One other related question: I came across a USOM report in 1963 which pointed out problems with the strategic hamlet program, and it particularly came down hard on the inconvenience that it caused the highlanders in some areas.

PHILLIPS: Yes. That was our report, I'm sure.

Q: I was going to ask, was that your report?

PHILLIPS: Yes.

Q: Okay. What haven't we talked about that we need to talk abousubsequently about Vietnam?

PHILLIPS: I don't know. The last time I went there was in 1968 and that was only for about —I was in the Far East on private business and I just dropped by for four days. I stayed with Ed. All I remember was they rocketed Saigon that night and, boy, that was a—

Q: Would that have been in May, somewhere?

PHILLIPS: No, that was, I think, in July or August of 1968. This waafter mini-Tet.

Q: Okay. That's what I thought you might have been referring to.

PHILLIPS: No, but they were rocketing Saigon with some regularity. You know, they'd fire about four or five or six in and nobody knew where the hell they were going to land and, boy, are they something. Whew.

Q: Yes, they're scary.

PHILLIPS: Well, during this period, this guy I knew who had a house out on what was Ngo Dinh Quoi, which became Independence Avenue, the main street coming in from the airport, which was across from the place that we had lived in, in 1962 and 1963, he

had an incredible thing happen to him. He was a Catholic. A priest came to his house. He had been sleeping out back because he had kind of a servant's quarters that he'd fixed up a little better than servant's quarters, in back of his house. He slept back there usually, just for protection, because he had been a fairly wealthy industrialist and he wasn't too sure whether somebody was going to lob a grenade in the front window or something. And this priest came to visit him so he let the father sleep back there, and he went and slept up in his bedroom in the main house up on the second story, which he had not been used to doing. That night a rocket came over the house, just missed the top of the house, and went boom, down into the room where the priest was, killed the priest, of course, and blew a concrete beam that was about this wide and this thick and about twenty feet long, about thirty feet. Just wrecked the hell out of everything back there, killed the priest, never touched him.

Q: Those rockets are scary things, I'll vouch for that. What waLansdale's state of mind when you saw him then in 1968?

PHILLIPS: I think he'd gotten very depressed. He couldn't get anything done. The Vietnamese, even if you had good ideas, you had to have some influence to be able to influence the U.S.

Q: What do you make of the stories that the Tet offensive prettwell gutted the VC structure in South Vietnam?

PHILLIPS: I think that it killed a lot of their regulars, and it killed a lot of their people, and certainly they were in a weakened state. In terms of their structure, the political structure was still around. Certainly it weakened them.

Q: Yes, there were claims that a lot of deep-cover people surfaceduring Tet and then of course couldn't go back down later on.

PHILLIPS: I think that's probably true. Of course, it was a tremendous psychological victory for them. And they knew—they'd already won the previous war [with] France, why shouldn't they win this one [with] the United States? They knew what they were doing.

Q: What was your reaction to the President's speech, the famouspeech—

PHILLIPS: When he resigned?

Q: —March 31, 1968?

PHILLIPS: I was just knocked off my feet, really.

Q: Everybody remembers where they were, like Pearl Harbor. Can yoremember?

PHILLIPS: Yes, I was at home.

Q: What effect did you think this was going to have on the Vietnabusiness?

PHILLIPS: I don't know; I was just stunned that... Q: Yes, I know. I rose up—

PHILLIPS: Then I was very leery later on about the negotiations. I was a strong supporter of Humphrey and very upset about what happened in that election. Funny, I had a conversation with him and Bill Connell afterwards, because he was very bitter about the Vietnamese. He thought the Vietnamese had really tried to pull one on him, but I tried to explain that that whole thing was something made in America and no Vietnamese could have afforded to say, “Yes, I support this.” The army would have thrown Thieu out overnight. Those were the political realities out in Vietnam.

Q: Were you involved in the problems that the Vietnamese were facinafter the debacle in 1975, getting people out and relocating people?

PHILLIPS: Yes, sure. I helped—

Q: Friends?

PHILLIPS: —with friends, and I was on the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors here at that time. We, as you would expect, reported out the first resolution welcoming them. I was very interested in trying to get the county moving, and the metropolitan area moving, of course, and doing something about it. I'd say that I had two lows in Vietnam, one was after Diem was killed and the other one was that one. That had to be the pits. It was really frustrating, because I knew that there was never part of the deal of Vietnamization that the Vietnamese army was going to be left to face the North Vietnamese with no help whatsoever. And Congress kept cutting back on their arms and ammunition, so I felt it was a pretty raw deal. And I think we're still—I don't mean us psychologically, but I think the degree to which other people trust us around the world suffered from that. I think one of the reasons why the Israelis are so damn belligerent and so hellbent on protecting themselves regardless of what the U.S. does is that some lessons were drawn out of that experience. I think that's very unfortunate, because then you get all kinds of other effects.

Q: Are you paying any attention to the El Salvador situation?

PHILLIPS: El Salvador? Yes, of course.

Q: What do you make of all the parallels that are being drawn in thprint and so forth?

PHILLIPS: I think that if we keep drawing them maybe we can make ianother Vietnam.

(Laughter)

Like a self-fulfilling prophecy. There obviously are a lot of things that are not the same. That kind of war has a lot of similarities to it, but the political situation is entirely different. And I think that the elections highlighted something about that. All of a sudden it wasn't a country of just fourteen families; there's obviously a sizeable middle class there. Secondly, public opinion in El Salvador is obviously very much splintered on how to deal with this

problem. It's a very complex situation, and the notion that one hundred guys down there who aren't even allowed to protect themselves with weapons somehow represent some Vietnam involvement is so absurd—

Q: You're referring to the case where the officer was seen with rifle?

PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, I'm just referring to the whole way that's been played up. The other thing which is really extraordinary is that here we've had these guys down there and not one of them has been killed.

Q: That can't be an accident.

PHILLIPS: How come? How come if the other side is so sharp and so capable and so determined? There are a lot of questions I could ask about that place. I know something about it, by the way. I know something about El Salvador. It's a country and a people, and some of its history. I know a lot about Latin America. My wife comes from Chile, I speak Spanish, et cetera, et cetera. I don't think this administration understood anything about El Salvador when they started or they wouldn't have blown the thing up as some big East-West test case. So they're responsible for part of the problem. But then you get this reaction, which is totally out of this world. There was a film on Latin America last night which is the worst kind of communist propaganda piece I have ever seen shown on public TV. Fortunately, they had a panel afterwards that just knocked it to shreds, but still, it's so bad, you know, that—

Q: That's a good—

PHILLIPS: God, Vietnam was difficult enough—

End of interview